

FIGMENT

—TALES FROM THE IMAGINATION—



No. 5

October 1990

\$4 U.S.

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Vision is a Science Fiction magazine dedicated to short, short stories (1 to 5 pages each). You can enjoy these stories in full on a coffee break, in the restroom, waiting in the car...you get the point.

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J.C. & Barb Hendee

Contributing Editors
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Production Assistant
Victick Mitchell

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NOTES FROM OUR DESK

Barb & J.C.

Hello everyone, We've had a busy couple of months! Another issue of *Figment* is finished, and *Imago: Comix/Art Digest of SF/F* is finally out and available.

[J.C.: God help me... what do I think I'm doing!]

[Barb: How 'bout painting, writing articles, writing papers, working the *Figment* slushpile, working the *Imago* slushpile, editing stories, corresponding with writers, expanding our public relations dept. and trying to program your computer to everything but jump off the desk and dance...um, the list goes on.]

[J.C.: Yea, yea, yea...]

To any of you still wondering, *Figmentation* has been deep-sixed. We just had too many projects going to handle a monthly SF newsmagazine properly. Major bummer. Of course, now we've gotten involved in spear-heading *Fugue*, the new small press literary digest of the University of Idaho—a multi-genre publication. So much for our free time! Will we never learn?

[Barb: That was your fault.]

[J.C.: Yea, yea, yea...]

We helped celebrate Moscon XII in September. It's always fun to have a Con in our home town because we can go home to eat and don't have to stay in a hotel. We met C. J. Cherryh and were happy to see everybody from Pulphouse.

[Barb: That's Dean, Kristine, Debra, and Mark... wake up, Mark.]

[J.C.: And don't forget Nina K. Hoffman and her ninja-turtle quotations for every occasion.]

[Barb: No way, dude!]

[J.C.: Oh, I almost forgot. Some killer green eyes, Debra.]

We sat on a "how to" panel about running a small press magazine—sharing our

vast knowledge and scaring the hell out of people.

[J.C.: You did all the scaring.]

[Barb: Yea, yea, yea...]

Well, gosh, we have no new and exciting improvements to share with you. For now, everything seems to look quite wonderful to us the way it is. This issue's fiction is a widely spread banquet of interesting concepts. Be sure to check out Dean Wesley Smith's very special story.

[Barb: You're a sick man, Dean.]

J. P. McLaughlin is back with a commentary on the state of SF literary terminology that we're hoping will raise a little controversy.

Jon Gustafson presents us with the first in a series of articles covering the history of SF/F art.

Jeff Mason joins Clyde Duensing and John Borkowski as a regular illustrator for *Figment Press*.

[J.C.: You're a sick man, Jeff.]

[Barb: Plagerist!]

[J.C.: So sue me.]

This issue also sees the first entry in our regular department "Sound Speculations," centering on finding science fiction and fantasy themes in music. Some more fun and games for everyone to get in on. And with our new CD player we're all set to indulge ourselves on this one.

[J.C.: I can only figure out how to work the damn thing.]

Well... we can't think of anything else to say. I'll bet you were expecting something profound and literary. Too bad. Maybe next time, but don't count on it.

[J.C.: You? Without anything to say?]

[Barb: So sue me.]

[J.C.: Plagerist.]

Until next time, enjoy.



GLYPHS & RUNES

Letters to Figment

I just received the July issue of *Figment*, and I wanted to let you know that it looks great. Your improvements come off very professional and slick. I'm proud to be a part of this product. —Mike O'Connell

Well, I've finally received my copy of issue #3 of *Figment* and truly enjoyed it, really I did. I specifically liked "Model Marriage" by Dean Wesley Smith, as well as "Bug Spray" by John B. Rosenman.

Yours is one of the best [magazines], and I have been reading quite a way lately.... It is compact, easy on the eyes, and hard on the mind, as it should be. I also liked the artwork; clearly descriptive of content.

—Gilles Charette

Compared to issues #3 and #2, #4 seems to be a little more uneven in terms of the quality of fiction. My favorites—"Third Dimension" and "Jeremy." Although the painting (or in this case, a tapestry) that comes to life and a vampire meeting an AIDS victim are now probably familiar ideas to most readers, Don Hornbostel and John Forbes introduced nice twists and told the stories so well that they were quite enjoyable.

A technical quibble with "A Place to Hide." If the narrator of the story was close enough to an atomic blast to be so seriously injured, while all those around him were killed outright, then the video tape of the event would have surely been completely erased by the strong electromagnetic flux surrounding the explosion. Also, the narrator would not have been able to drive away from the scene—the car's electronics would also probably have been made inoperative by the electro-magnetic storm of the explosion. Onwards!

—Dana Cunningham

First of all, WOW! *Figment* #4 left me impressed and excited! The layout is fantastic and makes for very smooth reading, and the illustrations were both chilling (J. Borkowski) and alluring (J.C. Hendee).

Of the contents, I'm also very impressed. There's a wonderful mixture of dark horror and light science fiction, which

is uncommon in the small press publications that I'm familiar with. Linda Bell's "Death Thoughts" left me wanting more, as did Brad F. Mays' "Cemetery Spells." Also, Daniel Sauer's "A Question of Cranial Capacity" was a wonderful humorous but ultimately thoughtful piece. These were my favorites among the fiction, but the rest of the stories certainly earned my interest and respect. —Brad J. Boucher

Thanks for the copies of *Figment*. I thought the Leland Neville story in #2 ["Banana Butterfly"] was great until the end, the last page. The last page just wasn't consistent with the rest of the story, could've been wonderful though.

—Steve Pasechnick

When I was reading the other stories, it was quite startling to turn the page from the prior story and see the Death Thoughts escaping in the artwork. Was that John Borkowski? Tell him thanks for me. I hope to meet him some time.

—Linda Bell

Hi guys, just wanted to drop you a note saying thanks for the sample copy.... If *Imago* comes anywhere near the quality of *Figment* #4 it will be a success! I also must say this (#4) is without a doubt one of the best graphically pleasing digest-sized publications I've seen, A-11 I loved the cover [Ree Young] and enjoyed Jon Gustafson's article.

—Jeff Mason

FIGMENT welcomes all correspondence. If you have something to tell us about the magazine or its content, about our good points or bad, or a response to another letter, drop us a line. We enjoy hearing from everyone. Write to:

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"Glyphs & Runes"
Post Office Box 3566
Moscow, Idaho 83843-0477

We'll print as many letters as we have room for. (Note: letters may be edited to fit available space.)

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Jon Gustafson

The following is the first of a multi-part series of articles on the history of science fiction/fantasy illustration, the art that often keeps us reading. Enjoy.

Science fiction/fantasy illustration has been with us for many years; exactly how many depends greatly upon your definition of what science fiction is or what fantasy is. For instance, if you include mythology as part of the *sf/f* continuum, the illustration that accompanies it dates back to prehistoric times when Cro-Magnon man was painting his beautiful works on the walls of French caves. (Which I find rather interesting because, until the early part of the twentieth century, France was the center of most, if not all, science fiction/fantasy illustration. Now, it seems, they prefer Jerry Lewis; how the mighty have fallen.)

However, a slightly more accurate definition can probably be traced to Plato, who developed two important science fictional concepts: the lost continent of Atlantis, and the idea of a perfect society, a Utopia. Since Plato's time, hundreds (if not thousands) of illustrations have been devoted to depicting Atlantis and various Utopias.

Fingers may also be pointed at Homer's *Odyssey* as a possible contender for an early fantasy adventure. Or even the earlier *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for which there are certainly plenty of extant illustrations in the form of sculptures and bas reliefs. Or you can consider Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage to the Moon* (1657), Jonathan Swift's *Travels into Several Remote Parts of the World...* by Lemuel Gulliver (1726), Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (1634), Ludwig

Holberg's *A Journey to the World Underground* (1741), or Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). Again, a lot depends on how you define the field of science fiction and its co-genres. The field can be as fuzzy or as clear as you wish to make it.

But what is indisputably clear is that modern *sf/fantasy* illustration began in France in 1844 with the work of 41-year-old Isidore Grandville (1803-1847; real name: Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gerard). He lavishly illustrated a book entitled *Un*

Autre Monde (which he also wrote, under the name of Taxile Delord) and gained a great deal of attention from it. As well he should, for the world had never seen anything like this book before. Grandville, who had illustrated a printing of *Gulliver's Travels* in 1838, pulled out all the stops for *Un Autre Monde*. Each page seemed to have an illustration more bizarre than the previous one. One shows a trio of crabs, who dance between lines of high-stepping mice and grasshoppers (all in the most fashion-

able gowns). Another series of drawings shows his famous "doublivores," animals concocted from two different animals (many of which did not exist to begin with). Most of the drawings in this book would not have looked too far out of place in some of the early issues of *Amazing* or any of the *Wonder* magazines.

And yet, as important as Grandville was in the history of *sf* illustration, he did not influence anyone. Why, I don't know; certainly his works were strange enough to be influential. Perhaps it was that he was ahead of his time, a curse of many bright and inventive people. Or, more



likely, it was that he simply did not live long enough to fulfill whatever destiny he might have had in science fiction.

Starting with his first book, *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1863), Jules Verne sprang upon the literary scene in France as a major writer. His "scientific romances" established a pattern that many writers follow even today; the illustrators of his books did likewise, but to a much lesser extent. This is because illustration, then as now, was considered a minor part of the literature and if the illustrations had not been included in the hardcover novels of Verne (they were first published in magazines), the names of the illustrators might well be lost. As it is, the artwork of illustrators such as Edouard Riou, Alphonse de Neuville, Emile Bayard, Leon Benett, Jules Ferat, Georges Roux, and Henri de Montaut has endured. In fact, though his name is rarely mentioned, Bayard's illustrations of weightlessness inside the capsule, and the capsule's splashdown (from Verne's *Around the Moon* (1870)) are often printed even today.

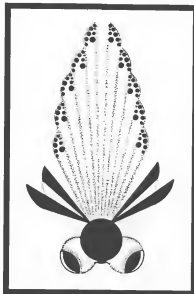
The first artist who had any sort of lasting influence was Albert Robida (1848-1926), another French illustrator who was known primarily for his work in three books, *Le Vingtieme Siecle* (1883), *Le Vie Electrique* (c. 1887), and a saga entitled *Voyages tres Extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul*. He dated on war; most of his more famous illustrations depicted military weapons or situations of the future (as he saw them). Some of his drawings are disturbingly accurate: his depictions of gas-masks, for instance, look quite modern. He was one of the first people to envision using bacteriological and chemical warfare, drew huge, armored battleships, submarines, and both large and personal

JON GUSTAFSON

airships. On the peace front, he illustrated large, pneumatic transport systems that could carry passengers at great speeds and a series of tubes under the streets of Paris that carried everything from people to water, electricity, music, and television (*le tele*, which were in *telephonoscope* kiosks about the city).

The huge successes of French scientific romances roused the interest of publishers and writers in other parts of the world, and with the new entries into the field came new artists. One of the best new authors was Herbert George Wells, who soon occupied the same position in England that Verne did in France. Unfortunately,

verne's novels sometimes had hundreds of illustrations, the basic British conservatism called for fewer works of art in each story. Many of Wells' works were printed in the *Strand*, and illustrated by some not-so-hot artists such as Edmund Sullivan, Paul Hardy, Claude Shepperson, and Alfred Pearce. However, Henri Lanois did do some very fine work for *When the Sleeper Wakes*. (Another excellent artist of the period was Fred T. Jane, who we now know far better as the originator of Jane's



Fighting Ships.

But it was not until the appearance of Warwick Goble (1862-1943) that British illustration reached any sort of plateau on par with the French artists. Goble was a prolific artist whose work appeared in many of the major magazines of the period and whose style finally broke with the stiffness of the earlier, Victorian artists. While Goble created many fine works for many of Wells' novels, including *The First Men in the Moon*, he is primarily known for his five dozen superb illustrations for *The War of the Worlds*, which was serialized in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1897. His depict-

tions of the Martian fighting machines have influenced illustrators of that novel right up to this day. Unfortunately, the glory days of British illustration—which included artists such as W.H.C. Groome, Harry Clarke, Sidney Sime, and A.C. Michaels—did not last, and it was not until after World War II that another crop of excellent illustrators appeared.

However, in the United States, things were just beginning to pick up. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Frank A. Munsey began publishing *The Golden Argosy* (later re-named, simply, *Argosy*), a magazine aimed at children. He soon combined the ideas of the dime novels and cheap printing on cheap paper and



St. John was at first a portrait painter on the East Coast, but moved to Chicago shortly after the turn of the century, where he lived until his death. His first work for a Burroughs novel was for *The Beasts of Tarzan* (1916), for which he produced the cover painting and almost three dozen black-and-white interior illustrations. His lean, muscled figures and dynamic drawing style caught the public's attention... and the publisher's. The next year, he was asked to do the artwork for *The Son of Tarzan*. When the A.C. McClurg company decided to publish E.R.B.'s next Mars novel, *The Warlord of Mars*, they asked St. John to do the illustrations. From that point on, St. John was considered the Burroughs illustrator and, even though he did work for many other authors (including Ray Cummings and Otis Adelbert Kline), his work is inextricably

by tied with Tarzan, John Carter, and the other Burroughs' characters. While St. John's career ended, for all practical purposes, in the late 1930s, his influence carried on for years afterwards and can be seen in the work of Frank Frazetta and the late Roy G. Krenkel.

Of course, St. John was not the only sf/fantasy artist during the first three decades of this century. Others, of greater and lesser note, included Herbert M. Stoops, Mahlon Blaine, Howard Pyle, P.J. Monahan, Joseph Clement Coll, Clinton Peetee, and Frank Pape.

In 1923, a new, different magazine appeared—*Weird Tales*. This was a magazine primarily devoted to fantasy

and horror stories and was the magazine that showed Hugo Gernsback that a specialty magazine, even one with atrocious artwork (their first artists were chosen almost solely on their ability to work cheap), could not only exist but, eventually, prosper. And, eventually, they hired better artists, such as Hugh Rankin, to make the visual aspect of the magazine match the literary.

Another magazine that featured science fiction and fantasy in the 1920s was *Argosy All-Story*. With artists such

as Robert Graef and Paul Stahr, this magazine often featured the works of Ralph Milne Farley, A. Merritt, and Burroughs.

The 1920s was a time of change, especially in America. In 1926, there occurred an event that was to change science fiction/fantasy literature—and its art—forever. Hugo Gernsback, a Prussian entrepreneur and publisher of the highly successful magazine, *Science and Invention*, brought out a new magazine. This was *Amazing Stories*, and its story—and that of the next two or three decades of the pulps—will be the subject of the next article in this series. ■

MÉLANGE

J. P. McLaughlin

I took a course in Science Fiction literature at a community college when I was eighteen. On the first day of instruction we all received a lesson in why we should call the genre "SF" and not "sci-fi," or worse yet and God help us, "sky-fi."

"It's really a sort of mortal sin," droned the instructor, "and it sends shivers down the spines of true connoisseurs." Well, looking around at my classmates, dressed as they were in their faded bell-bottoms and skin-tight acetate shirts (the Bee Gees were a big deal at the time, if you need another clue as to the era), I had a difficult time thinking of us as *connoisseurs*. Consumers, perhaps. Fans, yes. But connoisseurs? No way.

I came out of that class with the die-hard conviction that "SF" was really truly what the genre should be called. I bought into the argument that anything that could be done to distance intelligent, dynamic, and brilliant speculative fiction from the drek that Hollywood regularly produces and is shown across the land late Saturday nights on something usually known as "Sci-Fi Theater" was a positive step. After all, why should the good and the bad all be lumped together? What did *Plan 9 From Outer Space* have to do with *Stranger In A Strange Land* anyway? So "SF" it was.

I'm beginning to think that wasn't such a hot idea.

Sci-fi as a term is much more difficult to muddle up than SF. Think about it. What else could sci-fi mean besides Science Fiction? During the Golden Age of the 1930s there were a number of strange variations; *scientifiction* comes quickly to mind, but these all revolved around the roots of science and fiction. In his essay *Science In Science Fiction*, Ben Bova describes the genre in its true form as "fiction in which some element of future science or technology is so integral to the tale that the story would collapse if the science... were

removed from it." That's a litmus test that much of today's SF would fail. The popular culture that formed around Science Fiction was based as much in the science as it was in the fiction. *Analog* (nee *Astounding*) has carried for most of its life the subtitle *Science Fiction/Science Fact*; the two simply are inseparable. But when you call the genre SF, you get what has become the most popular definition these days: speculative fiction.

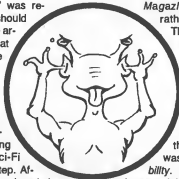
Speculative fiction doesn't really narrow the margins very much. Stephen Donaldson writes speculative fiction, but I wouldn't call it Science Fiction. The same can be said for Lisa Goldstein or even Paul Theroux. These days, when you pick up a copy of Isaac Asimov's *Science Fiction Magazine*, it's really speculative rather than Science Fiction.

The lines of demarcation are smudged and bordering on non-existent.

It was the excitement of future possibilities that brought Science Fiction to its legitimate place in the literature of our society. It was the literature of the unfettered mind, but it was always founded in probability. Science Fiction is exciting because it just might come to be. That's not the case for works of fantasy, nor for many works of speculative fiction.

All is not lost. Greg Bear writes Science Fiction in its undiluted form. So does Larry Niven, Charles Sheffield, Hal Clement, and a whole bunch of other talented folk. Publishers of books and magazines may want to muddy the waters in the name of marketing strategies, but that can't change the fact that there are many different animals living in the zoo named speculative fiction. I, for one, am a bit too much of a purist to enjoy finding the Science Fiction habitat populated with Fantasy. Like most jargon, the term SF just makes it more difficult to understand what it really means.

Perhaps it's time to dust off sci-fi as the term of choice and put a little order back into the menagerie. ■



TROPHY

Kevin J. Anderson & Denise Dumars



The horse's unshod hooves packed the snow down as it plodded into the village. Relav huddled deeply in his warm pelts as he rode, but the cold and wind had long ago stolen all feeling from his fingertips and cheekbones. Spring had come to Kiev.

Already, sunset smeared a glow on the brittle sky, and Relav hoped the people he knew in the village would offer him shelter for the night. As he warmed himself among them with mead and meat, he could tell them of his victorious battle against the wizard lark. The bloodstained sack hung on one of the brass studs of his saddle, its burden rocking gently against the horse's side, seeming heavier than it really was.

He guided the horse down the path that passed through the center of the village. Smoke moved sluggishly from narrow chimney holes in each of the underground dwellings. The air inside would be stale and smoky, but the room would be warm and filled with the scents of other people like himself. Relav looked at the familiar cluster of homes with a kind of regret that bordered upon fear. It had once been his home. But things change.

The people came out to stare silently at him. His heart came to his throat as he saw a few women rushing to hide their children within the dwellings. The wind whipped dark brown strands of hair into his Viking-blue eyes, making them sting and

water.

The horse plodded defiantly onward, and Relav fixed his gaze on Tardos the village elder, a squat man with reddish hair and a voluminous heart. The others looked at the bundle tied to Relav's saddle where the blood had dried and stained the leather. "Poor lark!..." someone whispered.

Relav clutched the heavy gold cross hanging at his neck, holding it out like a totem in front of him. His gaze swept over the cruder crosses which stood on sticks outside each dwelling's entryway in a grudging show of support for the new religion that Grand Prince Vladimir had commanded all Russia to embrace. Relav knew that no trace of Christian paraphernalia would be found within the homes.

"Who will shelter me for the night?" Relav searched the faces of the villagers, but no one answered him. "I offer the blessing of Grand Prince Vladimir himself." The words seemed frighteningly bleak to him, as if a part of him had gone, lost somewhere inside the cluttered dwelling of a wizard.

Several of the villagers turned in nervous sobs and ducked back inside their homes. Others stared at him with wooden gazes that burned but gave off no warmth.

These people were my friends, my family, Relav thought, but with one stroke of a sword I have severed them from me as well.

"You have committed a grave sin, Relav son of Plenkhow," Tardos said as if to a stranger; his words rang out on the harpstrings of the frigid wind. "You will find no shelter here."

Relav covered his shame with anger. He raised the ornate cross before him, thrusting it at Tardos. "I am your Christian brother!"

"We were all baptized," the elder said bitterly. "But you cannot stay here." Tardos turned his back upon Relav, and the rest of the villagers fled into their homes. Relav sat alone on his horse in the cold, feeling beaten.

He waited for a long moment, unwilling to believe that no one would take pity on him. He knew that when he left the village—his home for so many years—he would never be able to return.

Relav urged the horse into motion

KEVIN J. ANDERSON & DENISE DUMARS

again, hoping to find a campsite in the forest before the iceprick stars came out.

Relav sat in the whispering forest, not yet ready for sleep. He heard only the hissing of his fire trying to burn the half-frozen wood. Birch trees rattled their branches like dry bones overhead, as if anxious for the darkness to engulf him.

With morbid fascination, Relav held the stiffening sack in front of him in the firelight. He stared at the indecipherable rust-like splotches and then, before he could lose his nerve, he quickly pulled off the thong binding the sack. Gingerly, he unfolded the cloth, exposing the severed head of wizard lark.

lark's flesh had not even begun to bloat. The skin had a waxy, clear-yellow tinge, oddly soft in the freezing air. The wizard's long gray hair had been woven into three thick braids, and a headband made of birch bark rode across his forehead. lark's beardless jaw, shaven closely with a wide bronze knife, set him apart from most men. Relav was sure he had closed lark's dragon-green eyes before placing the head in his sack, but now those eyes were wide open again, and they stared at him. Stared.

The wind picked up for a moment and then dropped away, like the gasp of a dying man.

When you kill me, you forfeit part of yourself. The rest is fertile ground. Fertile ground.

Relav heard the wizard's final curse clearly in the night, startling him, but then he realized it had been only a too-vivid memory. His neck prickled with sweat in the cold air. He didn't want to be alone here.

When the pounding of his heart had slowed, Relav sat down on a cold log, wondering if Grand Prince Vladimir ever remembered sending him on his mission. Vladimir had sent out many men like Relav, commanding them to bring back the heads of *the vukhvi*, the unrepentant pagan wizards who refused to accept the newly mandated Christian religion. Relav knew that many of the people resented the decreed baptisms and had gathered around the wizards to secretly continue the old religions. Vladimir had embraced the Eastern Ortho-

dox Church as a way to open doors of trade with the civilized world, as well as to unify the many petty clans and peoples who squabbled over their godlings and spirits. And Vladimir had ordered that the *volkhvi* must be slain if they would not give up their pagan ways and support him.

Relav found himself unable to place the sorcerer's head back into the sack. Instead, he gingerly set it on the ground, careful not to take his eyes away, and held the heavy cross, hoping to draw some comfort from it. The glassy green eyes of the dead wizard reflected the firelight.

Iarlik had been a good man, somewhat odd, powerful but gentle in his own way. In the years when Relav had lived in the village, Iarlik had always helped the villagers by offering the proper sacrifices for the crops to grow, for the hunt to be good, and for the winters to be easy. Occasionally, Iarlik had even helped with the actual labor, although the villagers grew nervous when he did so. The wizard had never even spoken to Relav, never harmed him—but now Relav had slain him, severed his head because Vladimir had ordered it done.

The villagers had been fearful of Relav when he returned from the service of the Grand Prince in Kiev. He did not need to tell them his mission. Iarlik had already fled his home and hidden somewhere in the forest in anticipation of an assassin sent by the Grand Prince, but no one had expected Relav to be the assassin... and Relav knew all the local places where the wizard might hide. He had spent several days stalking, until he finally found Iarlik's swiftly constructed hut, and he had burst in the door without knocking, sword drawn...

Relav was a Christian now, willingly baptized, and he did not take conversion lightly. Others may have converted only to save themselves from the sword, but not Relav. He feared that the gods, or the God, could know when one's worship was not sincere. And how could the defeated gods wish anything other than to wreak harm and vengeance on the land? The old gods must fall, swiftly and cleanly, with no opportunity to cause further pain. Iarlik had to die.

But what powers could such a wizard have, even in death? Why hadn't Iarlik fought back when Relav came to slay him? And what did his curse mean?

When you kill me, you forfeit part of yourself. The rest is fertile ground. Fertile ground.

Suddenly, the darkness and the silence made it difficult to breathe. Relav wanted to call for help, like a child, but he had gone far from the village, and no one would help him anyway. And how was he going to cope with the long journey back to Kiev, alone in the restless forest, bearing the head of a dead wizard?

Relav used his fingertips to close Iarlik's eyes again, and he quickly wrapped the head back up in its stiff sack.

He traveled all then next day but saw no one, no movement on the wind-swept snow, no roads, no smoke or sign of other human beings in the vast wilderness. His voice had stiffened in his throat, and he wanted to shout, to hail someone, but it was as if the wind had swept everyone away.

Relav saw the tracks of a rabbit peppered on the snow, winding one way then another, then vanishing abruptly and leaving only a drop of blood where an owl had snatched it up. Relav knew the *volkhvi* could divine many things from looking at tracks left by a rabbit in the snow. Iarlik had read messages in the flights of birds passing north and south each year, or in the paths of stars that fell on winter nights. All of nature could speak its own language to the *volkhvi*.

Relav led the horse out of the hills, crossing the flat plains where nomads often camped. The grasses had been locked down by the snow, motionless, and the silence pressed on him again. He found the refrozen slush from an abandoned camp, but the fire was long dead and the tracks of the nomads had been erased, leaving him to guess the direction they had gone.

After noon, a thin, abandoned dog came galloping through the melting snow, yapping and excited at seeing a man on a horse. The dog looked as if it had recently been in a fight, but it circled Relav's horse with enthusiasm, barking. It stopped for a moment, sniffing the air, and suddenly fixed its eyes on the bloodstained bundle tied to the saddle. The dog howled briefly, and then bounded away.

That night, Relav camped by the nar-

row bank of a stream in the steep hills. The forest was very dense around him, and he had to tie the horse farther up the hillside where it could try to graze among the frozen grasses without losing its footing. Relav took a blanket, some food and the makings of a fire, and the bundle containing Iarlik's head. He stared at the bundle as he munched a few pieces of dry and heavy pack-bread, then he opened the sack again.

The wizard's facial muscles had tightened with rigor, spreading his lips in a wide, unsettling grin. The three thick braids looked like waiting serpents, held back only by the birch-bark headband. And Iarlik's cold emerald-green eyes had opened again by themselves, unblinking and staring.

Remember.

Then ask yourself if I was just.

The words rang loudly in Relav's head, on his conscience, and he fell backward into a sudden sleep as the maw of dreams gaped at him.

Heralds ran through the wooden-walled city Kiev, shouting the Grand Prince's orders. Every man, woman, and child must take themselves to the Dnieper River at once to be baptized in the Christian manner, or else risk Vladimir's displeasure. Stone idols were smashed, wooden ones chopped down and burned. Great fires rose up, and all saw how easily the old gods fell. Zorya, Volkh, Stribog, even mighty Perun.

The muddy banks of the river were crowded with angry, frightened people. The guards rode up and down, Relav among them, watching the people. Hundreds were herded into the cold river. One indignant merchant argued that he was already a Christian, but Relav pushed him into the water anyway.

Priests dressed in the garb of Byzantium chanted in Greek, speaking the litany that gave protection of the gentle God to all those who stood at swordpoint in the cold with dripping clothes. Relav had heard the priests in the hall of Vladimir many times; he knew the stories, the rituals, and understood them. But these people were now Christians as well, though they did not even know the name of the Son of God. Some of the people refused, and the river

was baptized with their blood. Others splashed aimlessly along the banks, as the current came and washed away the old beliefs.

Relav awoke in the grim light of dawn. He had twitched in his sleep like a dog, rolled over on the narrow bank to trail his hand in the icy water of the stream. The stream ran westward toward Kiev; eventually it would meet and add its life to the Dnieper, where all the "sins" had been washed away. He pulled his hand from the stream as if bitten.

Feeling unclean, cast out by his old beliefs and yet trying to find empty consolation in his new God, Relav took his knife and hacked away at his beard, cutting himself badly several times, but in the end his whiskers lay on the snow by the dead remains of the campfire, leaving his jaw naked, an affront to Kievan tradition.

He looked at the wizard's head propped up on the gravel. The eyes had closed again, as if satisfied.

Before Relav set off into dawn, he habitually muttered a prayer to Perun and made motions signifying obedience to Stribog and Zorya. He stopped suddenly, swore in horror at himself, and spent many long minutes huddled over his golden cross, begging forgiveness from the Christian God.

Throughout the day, Relav led the horse through the dense stand of spruce, birch, and aspen. The air smelled fresh, but he forest itself seemed poised, tense. Alive, and angry at him. He remembered tales of the volatile spirits, called *leshie*, which could be indistinguishable from their surroundings if they so desired. Tall as a tree, green and tangled as vines, shaggy as moss or bark... or small as a field mouse in order to pass through the densest thickets. Relav also heard that the *leshie* often appeared as a whirlwind of blowing leaves and snow, or as an owl, or a wolf. Relav looked around him in the frozen forest. He felt watched.

Leshie could produce all the sounds of the forest: the wind, the creaking of branches, the rustling of snow-laden spruce boughs—and if a mortal man paid too much attention to such sounds, he could be put into a trance and led off the

path to become lost forever.

Relav's horse seemed oblivious to any change as it plodded on, thin and exhausted from walking too far and eating too little. Trembling a bit, Relav reached into the bags of the saddle and withdrew his last lump of bread. He broke off a piece and dropped it to the ground, then opened the drawstrings of his dwindling pouch of salt and sprinkled some of the grains on the snow, signifying life and eternity. "Accept my sacrifice, *leshnye*," he called into the silent forest, then muttered another prayer to the Christian God to forgive his weakness.

A twig snapped behind him, and the horse, startled, bolted into the thinning grove of birches.

Relav looked around fearfully. Despite the order of Grand Prince Vladimir, the old gods were not dead. How could the old gods not be vengeful against their followers who had betrayed them, as Relav had done? He spurred his horse to a faster pace.

Relav pictured Perun, the Formidable One, who wielded a thunderbolt and a giant stone axe to strike out at the world in his anger. Relav himself had seen the shards of rock scattered around a lightning-blasted tree, splinters of Perun's axe-head. And raven-haired Zorya, the goddess of warriors, rode on her black stallion beside Perun as they watched over battlefields. And great Stribog, god of the winds, struck a fierce gale laden with storms at the onset of spring, reminding all of his winter's wrath. And Volkh the Werewolf King, patron god of all wizards with his fiery eyes and bristling body, protected all the *volkhvi*... such as Iank. Relav had murdered Iank.

He felt a cold, insubstantial hand at his throat, with sharp claws preparing to rake across his jugular. Black spots danced before his eyes and he thought he could see the shadowy form of Volkh glaring at him, looking with a vengeful anger at the bloodied sack tied to the horse's saddle. Perun, Zorya, and Stribog all stared at him in their own turn, gnashing their teeth, seething with desire for revenge. Relav, traitor to his village, to his old beliefs, rode unprotected and alone through their forest.

With his bare hands, Relav clutched at the golden cross hanging uncovered at his chest, but the metal was bitterly cold, searing his fingers. The rope around his neck seemed to burn, almost like a noose, and he pulled it off, tucking the cross in his saddle bag opposite Iank's head.

The horse stumbled uncertainly as Relav tried to push it to a faster pace. They entered a ice-locked peat bog, where the lumpy blocks of earth had frozen into grotesque and difficult terrain. Tall grasses, matted by the snow, protruded in clumps like patches stubble from Relav's newly shaven beard. The ashen clouds above belled how close it was to sunset. A few solitary pines and aspens stood like skeletal guardians, and the air seemed to be growing even colder. Relav did not feel safe in this place.

When you kill me, you forfeit part of yourself. The rest is fertile ground. Fertile ground.

He began to hear voices in his head, whispering curses, seductive promises, threats, all growing stronger as nightfall approached. Relav closed his eyes tight and bit his lip. He began to pray to the Christian God, loudly uttering the rites he had memorized, but a rushing roar like an angry wind filled his mind, drowning out the Christian prayer, pushing through his cold-numbered ears.

Letting out a pathetic cry that sounded eerily human, Relav's horse pitched forward onto the frozen ground. Relav tumbled to the snow and scrambled to his feet, eyes wide, looking for some supernatural attacker. The horse wheezed and groaned, and the man could see the ribs rippling beneath a too-thin layer of hide. Within moments, the horse shuddered and became as cold as the frozen marsh.

Relav tried to stammer something as the night closed around him, but he was completely alone. The spruce boughs grated together in the wind, in a voice like a *leshny's* satisfied whisper. Relav turned around and around, terrified. He hurriedly cut free one of the dead horse's saddle bags that contained a few rations and a flint, after a moment's hesitation he snatched the sack holding Iank's head. Relav began to run into the jumbled frozen bog, fleeing the voices and the curse-

stricken horse, leaving his golden cross behind.

He collapsed when darkness, exhaustion, and cold drove him to his knees. He gathered together enough wood for a small campfire, and spent the night in mortal terror, staring with his watery blue eyes out beyond the flames into the frozen marsh. An inexplicable mist had risen in the bitter cold, swirling, sometimes approaching, sometimes receding, like the slow inhaling and exhaling of a vengeful god. Dancing, hypnotic marsh lights flickered just beyond the range of his vision.

The sack holding the wizard's head sat unopened on the opposite side of the fire. Relav crouched and muttered to himself, steadfastly offering prayers, but paying little heed to whom he addressed.

Unconsciously, as he sat trembling, he began playing with his long hair, but he did not notice that heavy streaks of gray had infiltrated the once-bronze strands. Moving with a life of their own, his fingers gathered his hair together into clumps, weaving it into three thick braids.

Relav stumbled blindly through the shin-deep snow, clutching the bloodied sack with his frozen fingers. The sun seemed to be rising and setting in a different place each day, altered in its heavenly course by the sorcery of the vengeful gods. He wandered sun-blind in the day, wind-burned at night. Time became a thing of distance. His memory was the working of an internal clock, winding down.

His three thick braids flopped in front of his eyes, but soon he fashioned for himself a headband out of papery birch bark. Wearing the birch headband, he felt stronger somehow, able to see much more as he passed through the haunted wilderness.

Images and scents which Relav could never have known rose around him: philtres, herbs, the differing charms for differing times of the year, spells to invoke the power of the harvest, the power of the planting. He heard chants, prayers, incantations, but now he understood them fully and knew their magic. Relav became more and more an empty tube as the days and hours passed, as he carried the chattering

burden inside his skull like a cancer.

When you kill me, you forfeit part of yourself. The rest is fertile ground. Fertile ground.

He did not feel his hair turn gray, or his eyes change hue. But his own mind faded deeper and deeper into the background, blowing like a candle in the wind, burning at the end of its wick. Until finally that part which was Relav flickered once, and then went out.

He plodded into the village, silently emerging from the forest in the opposite direction from which he had come days before. He still clutched the bloodstained sack in his sinewy fingers. The villagers hovered by the doors of their dwellings, astonished, unable to speak.

He flipped his three long gray braids away from his face and stared at the villagers with his dragon-green eyes. His chin was newly shaven, clearly this time, with a wide bronze knife. "Iank," someone whispered, and others repeated it, muttering among themselves. Even Tardos, the red-haired elder, hung back and waited, frightened.

"I have returned," he said in a voice which sounded very old and very powerful.

He ripped open the thongs binding the sack and spilled its shriveled burden onto the half-melted snow of the path. Relav's head stared upward with Viking-blue eyes, his brown hair matted with mud.

Iank turned and walked back into the glistening birch forest, following the secret ways until he reached his cold and barren hut. Then he began to scrape the dark bloodstains from the floor. ■



AT THE DEMONOLOGIST'S

One hot and very quiet afternoon
 I reached the limit of a certain road
 And saw the place so long romanticised:
 The dwelling of the demonologist.
 The sounds of knocking cut into the silence.
 No one appeared to be at home. I looked
 Around, observing with respect the signs
 Of *Danger* set about a normal scene
 Of spacious house with small connected office.
 No mourning dove called out her ghostly moan;
 Instead, a child next-door glanced at me.
 Nothing seemed portending but those signs
 Whose metaphysical intent could not
 Be grasped unless one knew their owner's work.
 It was not dogs that strangers had to fear
 But what are called depraved demonic spirits,
 Those fallen angels, Bible-witnessed, which,
 He said, tormented man by taking shape
 As eerie swirling masses, black as ink.
 Were they lurking even now behind
 This door? If so, how very odd our world;
 For only half an hour before, in town,
 I had enjoyed a "thick-shake float" and watched
 The smiling sweaty children come and go
 With ice-cold drinks against the summer warmth;
 American normality embodied.

Yet, standing here, between the door and windless
 Encroaching woods which stood behind my back,
 Quite another landscape came to mind,
 (Recalling ancient Endor, Saul's undoing).

I knew what he affirmed. Could it be true?
 He said he had the facts to prove his case.
 Do fierce inhuman spirits, living essence
 Of scalding hatred, flit about this place
 Because he rankled them repeatedly
 By formal exorcisms deftly done?
 It's strange that those whose names no mortal lips
 Should speak except in dire necessity,
 Who brought possession when Jerusalem
 Was young, should still exist today, at large;
 Must one accept all this on trust, or leave
 The hearth of supernatural religion?
 Neither, some might say. But I recalled
 His words and tapes and photographs. No wonder,
 Then (thinking of the various shapes they take;
 Deceptive freaks—perverse, sadistic, lewd)
 I grew uneasy standing there alone.

Upon reflection, solace came to me.
 Protection does exist against such beings:
 A shining fence is built around our race
 Through which no sombre toads or sable masses
 May hop or drift except by occult summons;
 A *cordon sanitaire*, seraphic work.
 "They shall not pass" must be the general rule
 Or long ago had seen the end of us.
 I left that place. No work for me to do.
 Demonology is not my field,
 Though it has its use. He showed me this.
 It sets the captive free; evicts the others,
 Sending them to sulk in dark abodes.

—Edward W. O'Brien, Jr.

WALKING AFTER MIDNIGHT

C. S. Fuqua



The tools in the back clanked and rattled as the truck's front tire edged off the road onto the bumpy shoulder. Jeremiah's head nodded, bounced. He jerked straight, arms rigid, snatching the wheel, swaying the truck back onto the highway. His muscles began to twitch uncontrollably. He'd nearly hit a hitchhiker. Someone who looked familiar, too familiar.

He stopped, shifted into reverse, but when he backed to the point where the truck had left the road, the hitcher had disappeared.

Probably figured I'd try again.

He drew a steady breath and wiped away tiny droplets of sweat that had

popped out above his lips. He put the truck in first and drove on. Rain streamed down in tinfoil strips as the windshield wipers beat steadily side to side. And soon Jeremiah again felt the monotonous rhythm lulling him toward sleep.

He slapped his face, shook his head. *Getting too old for this.*

He steered the truck into the parking lot of a small grocery store, closed for the holiday. A Santa Claus grinned from the doorway. He punched off the lights, switched off the engine, closed his eyes. And though he'd stopped here simply to catch a nap, without the monotony of the road and the wipers, sleep became impossible.

C. S. FUQUA

He twisted out of the seat and stepped into the rear of the truck. Maybe straightening his tool stock would at least get his blood pumping enough to keep him awake until he got the truck home—"after midnight," he mumbled bitterly, but the words conjured up a smile. In his mind, Bessie smiled back. She had loved country music, but no artist better than Patsy Cline. And though she couldn't remember the words, she used to sing one song relentlessly, the tune Jeremiah's grumbling had brought to his own lips now—"Walking After Midnight."

The frigid breath of December whispered in through the door cracks. A half-century of pushing wrenches to service station owners, to hardware store operators, to anyone, to everyone. Jeremiah had worked for three companies, none with a retirement program. Yet Bessie had begged him to retire ten years ago: "We can live on social security." But a man and woman, he argued, can't buy much of a life with peanuts. Still, Bessie pleaded, and finally Jeremiah said okay; he'd give up the road, he'd come home to putter. Then Bessie had to go and have that heart attack just two days before he was to give notice.

"Grammar said you were going to quit."

"I was, baby, but I got no reason now. Living alone ain't much of a life."

"But you're not alone, Grampa. You have us."

"On weekends, Missy. I can't live my life on weekends."

A crescent wrench clinked against pliers in Jeremiah's quivering hands. Bessie had lived her life on weekends.

The rain gradually hardened, grew into sleet that battered the roof. Wind whistled under the doors. Jeremiah cupped his hands around his mouth and blew as he started for the front. He crawled into the seat behind the big wheel and cranked the engine, remembering how Bess used to wait up until he got home, no matter how late. He peered into a night he had not seen the likes of in a good twenty years. Last time the rain had turned to sleet this early in the season this far south, the government had called about his son.

Jeremiah's truck pulled onto the deserted highway, headlights beams driving deep into the mercury slick sleet. Another

hour, he'd be home. For the weekend. Clop-clop. The windshield wipers did their job, allowing thin sheets of ice to form only around the edges where the defroster could not make itself useful. The road passed in hypnotic streaks of white.

Clop-clop.

"Sarah says you got someone else on your route, Jerry." She laughs.

"You believe everything Sarah says?"

"If I did, I'd've left you a long time ago."

No one laughs. They lie in the darkness until one of them—they never remember which—kisses the other, and they bring their bodies together, caressing, lingering.

Clop-clop.

Jeremiah's head bobbed.

A whisper: *"Jerry."*

He gasped, snatched himself erect and yanked the wheel, bringing the truck weaving center-road. He glanced around, his eyes filling. That voice. He'd heard it a million times in dreams, conjured it up a million times more in memory. But this time—so real.

In the fringe of the headlight beam, someone waved from the ditch. Jeremiah wrenched around for a better look, but the image was gone. A mirage. A senile old man's wish image. He shook his head sadly at his mistake.

First to go's the mind, then the body.

Bess had said that. Used to call him crazy when he'd sneak up behind her in the kitchen and race icy fingers under her dress and clamp his hand to her thigh. She'd scream like a psychotic killer and chase him through the house with spatula in hand, dripping spaghetti sauce down her arm. Then he'd spin around, catch her in a bear hug, and they'd kiss and fall on the couch, tangling, forgetting the meal on the stove. And when they would finally sit down to dinner, he'd laughingly sop up as much as he could hold, all the while saying, "Charcoal's good for you!"

First to go's the mind... It was a luke back then, but hearing and seeing things that just aren't there isn't funny at all. Too distracting, too discomforting. If Jeremiah didn't face the inevitable, on one of these late-night, long-route drives he'd find himself...

In the ditch, in waste-high weeds, a man in army fatigues, his hands cupped at

his mouth as if holding a harmonica.

"Bill?"

Jeremiah slammed his foot onto the brake pedal, and immediately realized his mistake. Never an accident in his career, and now, the very night his mind starts to go, he destroys his perfect driving record.

The truck broke into a dream-like skid. By the time his body began to respond, the dreamy skid had turned into a nightmare roll. Wrenches clattered and banged from their bins. Jeremiah felt himself rise into darkness. He heard the crash from far away, a tiny sound, a pin dropping. Then gradually, he drifted back, back, could hear the steady rain of sleet on steel, the clap-clap of the windshield wipers, the hiss of water on a hot engine.

Jeremiah raised his head and groaned. Crystals of freezing water dripped in from somewhere above. He touched his forehead, winced, pulled his fingers away. In the dim dashboard light, he could see blood.

"First the mind," he mumbled, "then the driving record." He raised up on one arm, got his bearings. The truck had come to rest on its side about twenty feet off the road. And for what? A tick of his mind, the image of a man who died twenty years ago in someone else's war.

Jeremiah sat up, bracing himself against the driver's seat. He got to his knees and checked his forehead in the rearview mirror. A superficial cut, more blood than wound.

Clap-clap.

Jeremiah clicked off the ignition. The wipers fell dead. He cut the lights. Sleet sliced against the truck, clung to the frame in freezing fingers. Jeremiah shivered, pulled his coat from the back of the seat and slipped it on.

"You can't drive today. There's ice on the bridges, all over the road. You'll kill yourself."

"Guess I'm stuck here then."

She grins, begins unbuttoning his shirt. "I guess so."

Jeremiah's teeth began to chatter as he sat there, trying to decide what to do next. If only someone would pass on the highway, but that was unlikely. He hadn't met another car in more than an hour.

Weather's going to play havoc with

business this winter.

The sleet began to ease as Jeremiah scraped his hand across the windshield and peered into the night. The darkness possessed an odd, metallic glow, and he could see tiny flakes of white intermingling with the waning sleet. Jeremiah's eyes warmed with the sight. He sniffled, wiped his nose with his wrist.

She shudders and snuggles closer. Her breath is a feather stroke on his neck. The sky is pewter through a window flecked by snowflakes. He thinks she is asleep until her fingers begin a slow walk down his stomach. Her lips tickle his ear. She hums softly, that same old song about walking after midnight. Before the army, Bill sometimes accompanied her singing on harmonica. But today she hums unaccompanied as she slides onto Jeremiah. The snow falls into a silent, gentle drift on their bedroom windowsill.

Jeremiah stood up shakily, his knees tight with age and arthritis. Worse every winter. He moved them in a circular motion, loosening up, then climbed onto the shelving to work his way to the rear. He flung open the back door, and the wind sang over him—chilling, yes, but somehow a relief from the feeling of being trapped inside. He lowered himself to the soggy soil, then pulled his collar tighter. The sleet had stopped completely now. Snowflakes gathered in his hair, settled on his eyebrows. A thin blanket of white had begun to spread on the highway.

He struggled up the bank, slipping once, then started walking in the direction from which he'd driven. He'd passed a couple houses since leaving the grocery, but he couldn't recall how far back those houses lay. Didn't matter. They were back there. And he needed a phone. Might as well get started. With luck, someone would drive by and give him a ride. Then he'd call for a tow, call the cops, call his boss. That would satisfy all the requirements. So what if the last guy to wreck a truck got canned? So what if that man had been with the company two years longer than Jeremiah?

"What're you supposed to do, drive in the snow? Even the plows won't get through this mess." She nuzzles closer and nibbles on his neck. "And this'll give me a couple of more days with you."

The phone rings. She groans playfully, answers, "Hellooooo?" A moment's silence, then she whispers, "Thank you," cradles the receiver and holds him tighter. He feels the warmth of her tears, the mucus she can't stop. "B-billie's missing."

Two days later, the uniformed men arrive at the door of Jeremiah's daughter-in-law. Jeremiah is on the road, trying to make up sales lost because of the early snow, when Cindy comes to Bessie and tells her that Billie is no longer missing: All that's left of Jeremiah's son is a medal, a flag, a set of dog tags and a body. No one knows what happened to the harmonica that Cindy gave him their first Christmas together, the harmonica he played when Bessie sang. "Charley probably took it for the good."

Jeremiah raised his face to the sky. Snowflakes settled on his brow and melted into tiny streams down his face, mixing with tears to soak the collar of his jacket. The winter wind that had earlier robbed the truck of its warmth had calmed now. Snow settled around him in a soft crackle, a swish. Jeremiah felt as if he could lie down here, draw the white cover around himself and wait until someone, anyone came by.

"So why don't you?" came a voice from behind.

Jeremiah caught his breath and spun around. When he saw the man, Jeremiah's mouth went slack.

The man wore no jacket, only army-issued camouflage pants, shirt and boots. A Purple Heart dangled from his helmet. The man glanced up, following Jeremiah's stare at the medal. "Best place for it. I'm a hero you know."

Jeremiah's eyes glittered in the pale night glow; mucus streamed from his nose.

"Grampa, Grampa!" The youngest one's killed a thousand Charleys in the back yard. Now his machine gun dangles silently off one shoulder. "Grampa, I saw Daddy!"

Jeremiah folds the newspaper, lays it on the floor. He slides to the edge of the chair and pulls the wide-eyed boy between his knees, his speckled hands on the boy's shoulders. His voice cracks: "Your momma already explained about your daddy. You know he won't be coming home."

The boy twists in the old man's grasp.

"But I saw him, I saw him!"

Jeremiah shakes the boy "Stop it! Your father's dead, Tommy. He's dead!"

The boy wrenches free, shatters the plastic machine gun against the doorjamb as he flees the room. Jeremiah buries his face in his hands.

"B-billie?"

"In the flesh... well, almost," the man replied, chuckling.

Jeremiah swallowed, felt his mouth grow as dry as sandpaper. First to go's the mind....

The young man in the uniform laughed again. "Then the body."

Isn't real just my mind. Jeremiah turned away and started down the road. First to....

"Dad," his son's voice called.

Jeremiah slapped his hands over his ears. His lips trembled. Tears rivered down his face. But he kept walking.

Then softly, pleading: "How's Cindy? The kids?"

That was all Jeremiah could take. His body began quaking uncontrollably. One more step, he knew he'd collapse. "Don't you know?" he whispered.

The young man's image shimmered; snowflakes drifted straight through. "Once, I tried once," replied the man. "How I wish I could let her know...." The image faded completely.

The old man reached out weakly, croaking, "Son?"

A second later the young man re-materialized, but his clothing had changed from army camouflage to jeans, a western shirt, a cowboy hat; the way he dressed the day he left home. A harmonica glittered into his hands. He raised it to his lips. But when the young man began to play, Jeremiah heard more than the harmonica's music; he heard the melodious humming of a woman. The he saw her, emerging from the shadows behind the young man.

A lump grew so large in Jeremiah's throat, he was certain he'd choke. His knees wobbled weakly as the woman approached, her arms beckoning. And then he felt those arms surround him. He buried his face in her hair, sucked in her musky aroma, savoring. The flesh of her lips pressed against his neck; her breath fell

hot and moist on his skin. The harmonica whined softly. And the woman hummed the old song about walking a highway after midnight, lonesome, hoping that somewhere he would be searching for her.

Jeremiah raised his eyes; the young man was gone.

"Bess..."

The woman put a finger to his lips. She took his head in her hands, spreading her fingers like webs, and slowly pulled him down, down, until they were lying on a bed of white, as warm and as soft as their bed at home. A delicate blanket settled over them. And Jeremiah drifted as lightly as a snowflake.

...

Sam Posner pulled his sunglasses off and squinted. In sunlight, snow always appeared ten times brighter. He opened the squad car door, stepped

into the driveway. Some guy in a tow truck looking for a few extra bucks on Christmas day had nearly run over a old man's body not ten feet from this drive a little past day-break. The trooper climbed the steps of the house, knocked on the door. A few seconds later, a tiny, gray-haired woman appeared.

Yes, she had heard something during the night. "Sounded like music, but I guess it was the wind. I looked out, but all I saw was snow."

Officer Posner thanked the woman for her time and climbed into the squad unit. He backed the car out of the driveway, and, with a sigh, headed for town. Now came the hardest part of the job: informing the next-of-kin, the old man's widowed daughter-in-law. Maybe the dead man's few personal belongings would soften the moment—a wallet, some change, a pocket watch. And of course, the gold harmonica. ■

A CERTAIN APE

if one certain ape had died
(smoke and nova, dust and rain)
and never humankind supplied
(above a cold Cretaceous plain)
with flesh to shape anew, as clay,
(that ravaged 'saur to mammal's gain,
then we could not be here today
(came once—and may well come again—
smog and smoke and acid rain.)

—W. Gregory Stewart

THE FIX

F. A. McMahan

I like things that pierce flesh," he said.

It was eight o'clock and I was standing on the corner of Bond and Eleventh trying to score. I hadn't had any last night and the need was starting to shiver through me. He was coming home late from work, three piece suit and color coordinated tie, designer haircut, and briefcase in hand as he crossed the street.

"Hi," he said, pausing at my corner, and his eyes traveled over me.

I said, "Hi," and pretended disinterest, looking up and down and wondering if it was going to rain, watching the cars creeping past as the light changed from red to green. It was dark and the wind was chilling and I tugged on my jacket to wrap it tighter, seal the warmth. I was freezing.

"Do you know what time it is?" I finally asked, staring at his black leather shoes with little gold buckles and wondering if they were solid.

He said, "Yeah," and my eyes slid up to meet his; they were moist and feverish.

"Cost you fifty dollars," I said, and he said, "Yeah, yeah," so I started walking, leading him down Eleventh, past the old Gaslight bar and away from all the traffic at the intersection. As I came to the edge of the old Kelley building I stopped and said, "Seventy-five if you want a room," not looking at him, just staring away into the darkness.

There was a long pause and I could feel his eyes on my back, crawling over me, probing me, slitting my clothes and peeling them away; then he said, "Fifty," and I turned and went down the alley.

It was a lot darker but not as cold with the building blocking the wind. I stepped into a boarded up doorway and he came in after me, his breath coming in short gasps now, pressing against me, dropping his briefcase on the pavement. His body was hot and I just stood there, letting him warm me and smelling his vodka breath and feeling his hands fumbling with my jacket.

I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have

to see him and he said, "Do you have a knife?" and I looked at him again and shook my head. His eyes went a little dull then, and his voice cracked as he said, "I like things that pierce flesh."

So I bit him.

I pulled him hard against me and sank my teeth into the hot flesh of his neck. He made a little sound of surprise, and then groaned with pleasure. It was a solid minute before he realized what I was and what I was doing, and then he screamed. It was a watery, gurgling scream, and I clamped my hand down on his mouth and turned, my teeth still in his neck, and pinned him against the brick as he thrust against me, his arms and legs thrashing about and his fists beating on my back.

I bit him harder and felt my teeth meet through layers of muscle and the blood poured out, past my lips, running down my chin and his chest and puddling on the ground, steaming in the frigid air, warming me as it went, filling me up. He had a lot more than I needed, so after a while I just held him and let it run out, run over and through and around me, as I slid down the wall, slipping to the concrete, holding him close and fading away into dreams of warmth and blood and illusion, letting go and drifting as my mind expanded away into nothingness.

...

It was nearly midnight when I got up again, peeling off my shirt that was glued against me with the blood, just coming off the high and already wondering about my next one.

I took out the knife that I'd lied about and slit his throat to hide the teeth marks, then wiped at my pants with the shirt and picked up my jacket where he had dropped it and pulled it on. I took his wallet and his keys and most of the junk he had stuffed in the briefcase. There were some cigarettes so I took them, too, and lit one, and I walked back out to the street, back to my corner, back to the intersection, where I could watch the cars go by and wait for another score. ■

FIRST STAGE

William G. Raley



So how's it goin'? I'm a little depressed myself. Remember that book, *I'm OK, You're OK*? I'm working on something similar—it's called *My Life's Totally Fucked Up, How About Yours?*

No one laughed.

No one at all.

"I can't believe he used that joke," Lawrence said.

Walter Bowers turned to him, flicked cigarette ashes into an ashtray without looking. "Yeah, but what can you do when you draw number one? Crowd's not even warmed up yet." He took a long drag, turned back to the stage and awaited his turn.

The comic paused, regained his composure and remembered the rest of his material. Four and a half minutes to go. Then he could sit down and wonder what went wrong.

More comics went on stage, did nearly as badly. Jonathan began to wonder why he was sitting at a table with these strangers, whether coming here tonight had been such a good idea.

Zanies was the only comedy club in Nashville: a unique form of entertainment for the country music-crazed city. He'd changed clothes at work and come downtown for... for what? *Fame and fortune*, he

told himself. Who was he kidding? He just wanted to do something besides sit at home alone watching TV or go to aerobics class and drool over women he knew he'd never have. Amateur night should provide an interesting diversion. Besides, comics got in free.

A woman ran down the aisle smiling and grabbed the mike from the emcee. She then let loose with an onslaught of one-liners that made her phrase "all men are pigs" seem a compliment by comparison.

"Lisa's stuff isn't bad tonight, you know?" Walter turned to Lawrence.

"Yeah. Got a ways to go till she..."

"Excuse me," said a kid across the table. "Do lots of comics hit it big after starting here?"

Lawrence riled his eyes and shook his head. *Another one*, he thought. Ready for fame and fortune within a week. All set to call the *Time* photographers, or at least to "do lunch" with Freddie DeCordova.

Walter put on a fatherly smile. "Where you go to school, son?"

"Vanderbilt. Business major. Name's Trent."

Then he made the mistake of asking Walter what he did for a living. The older man sat back on the stool, gazed pensively at the ceiling and rubbed a nonexistent beard. Lawrence shook his head again, got up and headed toward the bar, like he'd heard the spiel a hundred times before.

"Let's see now, I could answer that a number of ways. Basically, I'm in the limousine business. Meet lots of stars that way. Dolly, Hank Williams Jr., you name it. I also sell jewelry; naturally, these folks buy a lot. They don't ask the prices, just tell me what they want, and I add on my cut. Then I also..."

Two tables over, Lisa was arguing with a comic wearing overalls and a grimy undershirt. Jonathan got up and walked past slowly to the wall of photos of stars who had played Zanies.

"...don't give a fuck if you call me a feminist, but don't you dare call me a bitch! Next you're going to give me the 'a woman's place is in the home' crap."

WILLIAM G. RALEY

"Damn straight! My wife cooks and cleans, looks after the kids, and does what I tell her to in the bedroom."

"Yeah, and she probably doesn't have to take her shoes off to count up to her I.Q. She'd have to be a *fucking idiot* to have married you!"

Jonathan stared at the "Glad to be here!" autographs scrawled on the photos of Jerry Seinfeld, Rich Hall and Bobcat Goldthwaite, wondering what the hell he'd got himself into. He headed back toward his table, then stopped.

At the other end of the bar sat Steve, the evening's first comic. He was downing a Bourbon and Coke like it was water. Three other glasses sat before him. His hair was unkempt, like he'd been running his hands through it. Jonathan thought about going over to say "hi," then realized he was depressed enough already.

He passed by his table, where Walter was explaining the intricacies and profitability of the funeral business, and sat down next to a well-dressed young woman he'd say "hey baby" to if he were drunk. Probably stuck up like the rest of that type.

"Hi, I'm Jonathan. Jonathan Talbert."

"Pam Jenkins. So tonight's your first time here, huh?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Let's just say it's easy to spot new-comers. So what do you do?"

"I'm an engineer for Avco Aerostructures. Over..."

"Next to the airport on Vultee Boulevard. I have friends who work there. How come I've never seen you at happy hour over at the 101st?"

"I... don't get out that much."

Lawrence was now on stage. Pam turned to watch.

"Guess it's hard to keep a conversation going and watch the comics at the same time," Jonathan said.

"Hmmm."

Have you'll seen those Friday the 13th movies? They're bullshit, I'm tellin' you. Show us some real horror, like 'Jason Visits Harlem.' He'd wish he'd stayed at summer camp. They'd take that hatchet and shove it up his ass.

"I was in New York during the garbage strike. Damn. I ain't seen so much trash since my high school reunion.

"You meet some crazy-ass people there, though. I met this chick in a bar—had on a nice jacket, said 'Warriors' on the back. I was gonna ask her to dance, but then seventeen of her boyfriends walked in.

"Later on, I'm in the subway, and this punk rocker's spray-paintin' graffiti on the train. This got real interesting when the train started moving. After I got off I read what he'd written: 'Long Live AAAAAARRRGH!'

"Well, that crazy dude in the back's flashing that light in my eyes, so I gotta go, but I want to leave you with... my dream. My dream is that when this evening of laughter is over, my car will still be in the parking lot. Good night!"

You know, Pam, some of these guys are really pretty funny. Seems like there's a fine line between just being good and really hitting it big."

"I guess you could say that." She sipped her gin and tonic, then leaned across the table. Jonathan couldn't tell whether she was smiling because she liked him or because of the buzz she was getting. "So how long did you practice for this?"

"A few hours."

"Really?"

"Yeah, my tape deck's on the Fritz, so I hooked up a microphone to my VCR. Walked around the living room and pretended someone was actually listening. I must've used up a whole package of notebook paper writing and rewriting material."

Pam sat up straight, finished the rest of her drink. "I'm impressed. But of course, the hardest part's yet to come."

"I know. Tellin' jokes before a live audience."

Her smile disappeared, and she looked away. "No," she said, returning her gaze to his. "Getting on stage."

Walter's number came up next. He'd procured a red tie from somewhere.

"Good evening, how are you?" His

index finger tried in vain to loosen the tie. He wasn't Dangerfield by a long shot, but then this wasn't the Improv, either. "Well, I'm glad somebody's feeling good. I took some pictures of myself recently. You know how they tell you when you screw up your photos, with stickers like 'Poor Lighting Conditions' or 'Bad Composition'? Mine had stickers that said, 'Unattractive Subject Matter.'"

"I see they've taken the staples out of Playboy centerfolds. Next thing you know they'll have one that holds itself up."

"And my wife. She doesn't love me anymore. The other day I called her from the office. She answered the phone: 'Mastercard or Visa.'"

"Hey, what has 42 legs and can't get up the next morning? My wife and a fraternity."

Trent, the college kid, had walked over to the club's entrance; apparently he'd had enough excitement without appearing on stage. Jonathan looked over and, in the dim light, saw him pounding against the wall. What's the guy's problem? he thought. Is the door locked?

Lawrence went over, put his arm the kid's shoulder and started talking to him. Finally, Lawrence gave him a pat on the behind, and Trent headed for the stage, did five minutes of fairly awful material.

The comic who'd had an argument with the feminist-but-not-a-bitch Lisa took the stage; his name was Bob. Jonathan was surprised it wasn't Jim Bob, or Billy Bob, or something—guys with a hundred-pound beer belly and a major attitude problem didn't go by Bob.

"I was just in New York, too. New Yorkers are so unfriendly, even their welcome-mats say, 'Fuck off!'

"Well, enough about sex already. Let's talk about women for a while." Jonathan expected someone to say 'yes!' but they didn't. "First of all, I truly believe a woman's beauty is more than skin deep—about six inches more! But seriously, women are a lot like cats—they only rub up against you when they want something."

"I don't know. It just seems like noth-

ing is real any more. There's so much advertising, so much hype. Hang on, let me check something here. Okay, this plant's real. Be with you in a minute, I want to check out the piano. I believe that if I can touch something, put my hands on it, then I know it's real. You—are those breasts real? Here, let me check. Well, maybe after the show..."

Jonathan desperately needed to practice his material; he told Pam he had to go to the restroom. Besides, if he heard any more sexist crap from the redneck on stage, he thought he'd puke.

The bathroom was tiny and badly in need of repair. The tiles didn't match and the toilet paper rack had nearly fallen off the wall.

He splashed water on his face to help stay awake; it was already past ten, and normally he'd have been asleep by now. He peered into the same mirror hundreds of other comics had and straightened his hair because he thought it mattered. The door swung open and Bob's two hundred fifty-pound bulk shoved him across the room and almost into the toilet.

"Damn, son, get outta the way. I gotta take a piss."

Jonathan wished he were big enough to tell him to fuck off. This guy'd never see his name in lights, but he didn't want to tell him that, either. Finally, he thought of something civil to say. "Where do you work?"

"Avco. Welder on the C-5."

"Really? Me, too. What brings you to amateur night?"

Bob looked at Jonathan and opened his mouth to give the stock "fame and fortune" or "none of your damn business" answer he gave everyone else. But he saw something different about this kid. Bob couldn't remember the last time he'd met a stranger who hadn't given him shit about something or called him a hick.

"I need the money," he said quietly. "My wife and I planned to have only one kid, but now we've got two. What were we supposed to do, have an abortion? No fucking way."

"Hell, I'm no comic. But I figured I can do better than some of those guys on TV.

Before I found out different, it was too late."

"Too late?"

"Go on, get outta here, kid. Your girlfriend's probably on stage by now. You don't wanna miss that."

So, this is Nashville, Tennessee, home of Avco Aerostructures and hub city for American Airlines," Pam said. "Anyone here tonight from American? Yeah, I got some bad news for you: you got some new competition. Tramp Airlines. My next door neighbor works for them. She's the frequent flier bonus. She was arrested in the gift shop once for doing obscene things with a model of a 747. Their planes even have groping and non-groping sections."

"Oh, and speaking of tramps, has anybody read Victoria Principal's autobiography—Leave it to Cleavage?"

Jonathan heard his name called. As he walked slowly down the aisle, he looked at the audience and noticed every one was wearing a suit. Why? When he turned back toward the stage, Pam's face was an inch away from his; he could smell Emerald diffusing off her cheeks and see that her eye shadow was slightly uneven. And he saw something else: a wildness, a presence in her eyes slowly fading like a neon marquee that had been turned off for the night.

"You'll do fine," she said.

"I'm not ready."

"You're ready enough. Just do it."

No one had told him the lights were so bright you couldn't see past the first two rows. Rather than stare at them, he opted for looking into the lights and pretending nobody was out there.

"Sorry I'm late tonight, but I ran off the road on I-40 and smashed into a tree. I was distracted by a billboard that said, 'Please fasten your seat belts.'"

"No, seriously, I just got back from the county jail. A friend of mine was arrested for sexually assaulting a pizza."

"Anybody here belong to AA? Yeah, there's a new group, AAAA, Afro-American Automobiles Anonymous. It's kind of a self-help group for black limousines with

an identity crisis.

"You know, they should have a telethon to help out all those idiotic telethon hosts."

"I did hear some bad news on the radio, though. Geraldo Rivera checked into Baptist Hospital last night. Hyper-extended his ego."

"Before I go, I'd like to leave you with this thought: a friend of mine has an occasional table; I wonder what it is the rest of the time?"

As he left the stage, Jonathan heard a strange sound, strange because he was hearing it now. Applause. Not from everyone, but from a few of the seventy-five patrons.

He headed for the exit. His five-thirty alarm and another day at work weren't far away.

Jonathan, wait!" He turned and saw Pam striding toward him. "Gotta go," she said. "See you next Tuesday." He reached for the doorknob.

It wasn't there. Neither was the door. When he turned again, she put her hand on his shoulder. "Let's sit down and talk."

Jonathan looked around. Except the comics, the bartender and the manager, the club was deserted—the audience had vanished. He didn't argue that they needed to talk.

"I'll give you the bad news first," she said. Her voice was as practiced as it had been during her routine; Jonathan won-

dered how many times she'd given this speech.

"You're going to be here for a long time."

"How long?"

"It depends on how good you are. Those people here tonight, they were all agents. None of them spoke to any of the comics. That means we'll all be here for the next show." She frowned, lowered her eyes. "We'll all be here until we get discovered."

"Does anybody get out?"

"Yes. There was a guy, Killer Beaz, played here up until a few weeks ago. Then something just clicked. I guess he's headlining all across the country now. He's the only one I can remember from here."

"And other clubs?"

"There's a Zanies in Chicago. Judy Trent and Emo Phillips got their start there. The same way we're trying to."

"That's the good news? A thousand-to-one shot?"

"Yeah, that's it. At least you don't age any."

"So when's our next show?"

"About twenty-one hours from now. Tomorrow, if you can call it that."

When Jonathan awoke, Pam was lying beside him, still asleep. He went to the window and looked outside. The gibbous moon and the stars were still in the pitch-black sky. His watch said seven a.m. He went on stage and practiced his material in silence. ■

JOJO Charles S. Rogers

The fact of the matter is a broken bone hurts, and if I could lay my hands on him...

Maybe writing this will pass the time away. Lucky I had my briefcase with me.

From what I can make of it, JoJo first visited us about three years ago. I don't know for certain, as I didn't get to meet him, only hearing from Chris that he had been around.

After a while, he and Chris got to know each other well enough that JoJo practically lived with us, or at least spent the night now and again, as Chris told me about the time they had wrestled one night.

That's when I began to wonder. You see, Chris is four, going on five years old. When he first mentioned JoJo I'd guess Chris was about two and a half. At that age it was hard to figure out who he was talking about, but at four it came through clearer. JoJo was a real person to Chris, but an adult would have a tough time catching up with him.

He wasn't exactly invisible, but shadowy and fast! You couldn't see him in the dark, and, as happened one night, you could hardly surprise him.

We were going upstairs, it being Chris' bedtime, and he said, "JoJo's in the bathroom." So, naturally I said I'd like to meet him and opened the door. No JoJo. But as Chris said, JoJo wasn't about to wait around

for some old grown-up to catch him. He was afraid he'd get spanked or some such thing.

Well, I've never been afraid of the dark, except when I've been reminded should be by some remembered story or movie, but I'm real nervous of it. I've always been sensitive to atmosphere anyway.

As time went by, I tried the other tack: laughing it off. That's when I made my big mistake. Children don't like being laughed at, and JoJo is a child. In mindset at least.

Tonight I came home by bus, my car being repaired, and took a short cut through the alley at the back of the house. It was getting dark, but I figured I could

see enough to use the basement door. Our house being on a hill, the door was on ground level, and there were lights on upstairs.

Well, I managed to fumble my way through the half light to the stairs without tripping over any toys, skates, or some such obstacle, and started up. Near the top I guess I finally trapped JoJo, and he couldn't get away as the door to the kitchen was closed.

As I said, he's a child in mindset, and he did the first thing he could do easiest. Pushed me, down the stairs. That's how it seemed to me.

So here I am with a broken leg, waiting for the family to come home from the movies.

But I'm not alone. JoJo is around someplace. ■



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DATA-LINK

Kay Fortunato



Don't look so glum," Rey said. "I'll be out of here in six months."

The energy web that sealed my Double's cell from the corridor shimmered briefly, faintly distorting his features.

"Six months seems like forever," I said. It was my fault Rey was in Retention, and although it was pointless to feel guilty about that, I did. It would make more sense to feel sorry for myself.

Rey stood watching me calmly, his face—my face—as unaccusing and emotionless as a stone. Brown eyes. Firm jaw. Nose a bit too broad. Wiry, auburn hair. A face that hid a few of its thirty-two years, but still gave the subtle impression that stress and failed ambitions had left their

mark.

"You're lucky," he said in that reasonable tone of his. "You watch. By the end of the year, the Feds will shut down all the education scams, and the penalties will be stiffer than they are now."

He was right, and I almost wished the Feds would find the other—the lucky ones who had evaded the law. "If you ask me," I said. "New Deal II" isn't working."

"We all knew there would be problems."

I was barely listening. "I can't believe I was stupid enough to vote for 'New Deal II.' Look where it got us."

"It got you me," Rey said with a smile. "That's great," I said with a note of

sarcasm. "Except you're in Retention, and I'm going back to work Monday after a year's retirement. Already Utopia has been tarnished." It was hard to think straight at the moment. Where were the guards when you needed one? It had been twenty-four hours since my last Data-Link with Rey. My implant was starting to trigger withdrawal symptoms.

A voice at my shoulder made me jump. "Ready for Data-Link?"

I turned. One of the guards, tall, blond, broad-shouldered, around twenty-five, held a Data-Link console and a portable power pack.

I almost bit his head off. "Where have you been? I'm getting dizzy and sick to my stomach."

He ignored my hostility. "I'll have to ask you to step into the cell. Regulations. We don't have Link cubicles in Retention. There's an extra cot in the cubby." He used a control on his belt to turn off the energy web, then prodded me inside.

Rey pulled the spare cot from the cubby. He sat on his own while the guard set up the power pack and console. The bleak, windowless cell offered nothing in the way of furnishings aside from the cots. I eased onto the spare cot, waited for all five of the console's violet "ready" lights to come on, then took fiber-cable A from the guard's hand and with shaking hands pressed the tiny mesh grid connection to the corresponding grid at the base of my skull. The guard handed fiber-cable B to Rey. Rey immediately hooked up and laid back on his cot.

"Good night, AI," Rey said, as always. It had become a joke between us. He would still be staring at the ceiling when I woke.

I glanced up at the guard before the console initiated REM sleep, wondering as I did what the guard's human counterpart was doing at the moment. Probably playing tennis, gardening, or watching a vid. The Good Life, I thought sarcastically... the government's trade-off for the mandatory replacement of human labor with efficient android duplicates.

Data-Link would induce REM sleep. Once I began to dream, my micro-chip implant would manipulate the recall of recent events, then record, catalog, and

store those experiences in the console. AI but the most trivial data would then be down-loaded to Rey. After that, Rey's experiences would be relayed to me in dream form. I found it interesting that Natural Memory Augmentation, NMA, via a micro chip implant, had to be conducted during REM sleep. Chemicals in the brain involved in storing memory, were formed in the hippocampus. The proper distribution of those chemicals, and the manufacture of essential new protein molecules—another important aspect of memory storage—took place only during REM sleep. When I woke, the dream experiences would remain as clear and real as if they had been my own.

I drifted off to sleep and the dreams started. Sometimes, like today, I was dimly aware I was dreaming.

I dreamed about playing golf with Lucinda. Puttering about in the agri-dome. Swimming in the pool in our back yard. Going over Todd's geography lessons together. The events of the day formed an unbroken stream. Then, the transfer shifted and Rey's memories invaded my dreams. The highlights of Rey's twelve-hour shift at my old job flashed for my review.

The entire exchange, which was required by law to maintain Rey's power-of-attorney and preserve our unity, took no more than fifteen minutes—a normal period of time for the body to experience REM sleep. I woke refreshed when I came out of the Link. The dizziness and nausea were gone. I sat and gently plucked the connection free and handed the fiber-cable to the guard.

"You lead an infernally dull life," Rey said as he removed his own connection. He grinned. "You should be glad you have to work your own job again."

"I don't like work. If you made enough money so I could travel and enjoy expensive hobbies, I wouldn't be bored."

"Let's not start that again," he said.

Trying to buy fake education credits so I could have a better life was what had gotten us in the mess we were in right now. Like most blue-collar workers, now that I had to make payments on my Double, I couldn't afford a college education. And by federal law, Rey wasn't per-

mitted to work any job I wasn't qualified to hold. Someone had to do mental work. It was a no win situation. Forced retirement was a blessing only if you had money to enjoy it.

"Will you be leaving now?" the guard asked me.

I nodded, then looked at Rey. "See you tomorrow, buddy."

Sometimes I wished Rey couldn't simulate human emotions. He gave me a cheerful grin, and with my own dry humor said, "Don't forget to polish the end tables and dust the crystal."

"Sure thing." It wasn't funny. More than likely, Lucinda really would dump the household tasks on me. Rey had freed her of those duties, but now, thanks to me, he was stuck in Retention. Since Rey was programmed to take orders from either of us, Lucinda had gotten in the habit of loading him down with chores as soon as he came home from work.

I followed the guard from the cell and paused in the corridor. "Only a hundred and eighty-one days to go, Rey. If I live that long."

"Always the optimist."

I left the building, walked dejectedly to my car, got in and sat fingering the controls. The turbines whirled to life when I touched the ignition. The car whispered forward. I didn't want to think about going home. I tried not to dwell on my misery as the auto-gulch kicked in and brought me out on the freeway.

Lucinda was waiting by the door when I came up the walk. Her blond hair was disheveled, her freckled face smeared with dirt. No doubt she was being repotted her prize hydrangeas again. She was an obsessive gardener, just as she was obsessive about anything she enjoyed. It was one of the traits I had found endearing about her when we first met. Now, it was simply an annoyance.

"How was he?" she asked. Her indifferent expression suggested she really didn't care.

I shrugged out of my jacket, tossed it in a chair then, on second thought, hung it in the keep when I remembered Rey wouldn't be around to pick up after me.

"Fine. What's the difference? Ac-

cording to you, he's just an android."

Lucinda frowned and wiped her face with the back of her hand. "You don't have to snap at me. It's not my fault he's in Retention."

I was angrier than she knew, but I tried not to show it. Comments about Rey always made me defensive. Flopping on the lounge I said, "Sorry. It's not just Rey. I'm not happy about going back to work."

"I know." She kicked off her shoes and joined me. "But it won't be so bad. You worked there for ten years before you got Rey."

Lucinda hadn't worked since Todd was born. She couldn't understand that I would rather sit in Retention than go back to factory work. She didn't see it as a hardship. The worst part of my punishment, the part she couldn't comprehend at all, was that being without Rey was like being separated from a part of myself.

Lucinda noted my dismal expression and sighed. "I saved your dinner. I'm afraid it's a little scorched. I haven't cooked for so long, I guess I've lost the knack."

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

She gave me a look that was equal parts concern and annoyance. "How about catching a concert? Columbus and The New World are playing at Haven Resort Center. We could get a sitter."

"I'm not in the mood for music right now."

Lucinda's expression went hardened. "I suppose you're going to sit and sulk for the next six months."

I bit back a sharp retort and refused to answer her.

"You wouldn't be this upset if I left," she said disgustedly. "I swear, you'd probably sleep with him if I wasn't here."

She knew Rey wasn't designed to have sex, but she'd made her point. And I had to admit that if it were possible, I might be tempted to sleep with him. It would probably be a lot more gratifying than sex with Lucinda, considering her attitude problem. She seemed to read my mind.

"You're sick. I'm going to change and go to the concert. Todd's doing his homework. Tell him that I'd go to bed at nine. Don't wait up for me." She bolted from the couch, disappeared down the hall, and

threw the bedroom door shut behind her.

I supposed I should apologize. Deep down, I knew I wasn't being fair to her. But why couldn't she at least try to understand my relationship with Rey? Why did she have to be so jealous? If she were a working woman with a Double of her own, she'd understand. I sat brooding and a few minutes later the back door slammed. Before I could get to the door I heard the familiar whine of the turbines. I watched from the window as the car's auto-guide indicator light came on, then the Ford-Toyota skimmed down the drive and onto the street.

When I got home from work on Monday, Lucinda and Todd were in the kitchen making dinner. I walked in and dropped into a chair at the table.

"Hey, Dad. We're making Chinese food." Todd pointed to a pan of glazed vegetables and pork-synth. "Mom let me stir the vegetables." He had my brown hair, Lucinda's fair complexion and freckles. He was a good kid. For a ten year old, and an only child, he was remarkably unselfish and mature. We had never had to argue with him to get him to do his homework or help Rey around the house.

"Looks good. I'm starved."

"How did work go?" Todd asked.

I had promised myself I wouldn't complain, but it had been a lousy day and I needed to talk about it. "It was awful. Nothing, not even reviewing Rey's work week through Data-Link, could prepare me. The others might look like the old gang I used to work with, but they sure don't act like them. No talk, no laughter; we don't even have music anymore."

I leaned back in my chair and frowned. "I felt as if I should be wearing a placard that read: Functional Obsolescence. I was the only one who stopped for breaks or lunch. Six months of this and I'll go crazy."

Todd gave me a sympathetic look. "You can always call in sick and take a few days off."

I shook my head. "Not unless I want to get Rey fired. There are no extra workouts to cover my job. Androids don't call in sick or take time off."

Lucinda threw more vegetables in the

wok. She didn't say a word. I'd get no pity from her.

I sighed. "How about some coffee? I haven't had any all day."

Lucinda, drenched with steam, turned and glared at me. Her hair was frizzy from the moisture. "Don't expect us to wait on you. Todd had a busy day at school, and I've been doing Rey's housework all day. You're perfectly capable of making coffee."

Her tone rankled. "And what do you suppose I've been doing all day? Napping? I'm tired, too, and I still have to drive to Retention."

"That's no hardship. You'll be with Rey."

I didn't answer her. I hated to fight in front of Todd.

"I can make coffee," Todd said. "I know how."

"That isn't the point," she told him. "You're father can wait on himself. Before, your father used to work and help around the house. It won't kill him now."

I couldn't hold back my anger. "Rey is in Retention, you've lost your slave labor, and you're never going to let me forget it's my fault. Thank goodness he isn't bitter about Retention. I don't think I could stand the mental flogging from both of you."

She slammed down her spatula. "Rey can't be bitter. He doesn't have feelings. It amazes me how you can treat him better than your own family. You've always spent entirely too much time with him, and now that he's gone, you mope around the house. I swear you're the most selfish man I've ever met."

"If I were selfish, I wouldn't care what happened to Rey, either."

She laughed. "Of course you would. You're in love with him, Al. And that's the same as being in love with yourself."

Her accusation struck a nerve, but I didn't want to admit it. If I felt closer to Rey than I did to her, wasn't that partly her fault? There was no use arguing with her. "Forget the coffee. I'm eating out. I'll pick something up on the way to Retention."

I knew I shouldn't leave. It would seem like proof that I'd rather be with Rey. But I didn't care. I'd had a hard day and I needed to talk to someone who could understand that.

I stood outside the cell after Data-Link. Now that the guard had gone, Rey and I could talk in private.

Rey looked at me carefully through the energy web. "You're having problems with Lucinda."

I hadn't tried to hide it from him during the Link, but I wasn't sure I wanted to talk about it now. I shrugged. "She doesn't understand what it's like to work twelve hours a day, take care of family business afterward, then make a forty-minute drive, bone-tired, to Retention. She sits around all day, tells me she's been working, and expects me to clean the house when I get home. It's her way of punishing me, I guess."

"You have to be understanding. My confinement is an adjustment for her, too," Rey said calmly. "She doesn't have her live-in housekeeper now, and she doesn't have you to keep her company. You spend most of your evening here. What kind of life is that for her?"

"It's not my fault," I said irritably. "I don't like it any better than she does. But she doesn't have to sit home all day if she doesn't want to."

Rey shrugged. "Lucinda has always been a loner. How often does she go anywhere without you?"

"She'll have to develop new interests." I was too angry at the moment to care about her social life. "I don't like her attitude. She resents the fact that you and I are close. What if her bitterness rubs off on Todd? He loves you. I don't want anything to change that."

"Is he upset because I'm here?"

"He's already asking when Uncle Rey is coming home."

"Todd seems to accept our relationship better than Lucinda."

I nodded slowly. "I've explained to him. 'Your Uncle Rey and I are best friends. We're close. Sort of like brothers.' I think he can understand that."

I thought back to the time Todd had said, "I know why you like him, Dad. He's easy to talk to." Then he had paused and stared at the floor and added, "And he doesn't yell or nag, like you and Mom." That had caught me off guard. I had never stopped to think that Todd might find

"Uncle Rey" a better father. But why not? Rey was in every way an exact duplicate of me except he had no irritating habits and he was never angry or snappish. Todd's words had muttered in the back of my head for days, refusing to be dismissed. What I should have told him was that while Rey might not yell or nag, he was incapable of emotions, good or bad. It might appear otherwise, thanks to Rey's programming, but Rey was incapable of love. If there was any noteworthy differences between us, I liked to think it was that.

Rey broke in on my thoughts. "It's after eleven. Shouldn't you be going home?" "I'm in no hurry. Maybe Lucinda will be asleep when I get back."

"Don't shut her out, Al. She needs you."

It was easy for him to call up the charitable side of me that I wanted to ignore at the moment. He didn't have to put up with her. "I'll see you tomorrow," I said stiffly.

Saturday I sat by the pool with a lemon ice. It was good to relax for a minute. Tom Baker came through the gate that separated our yards. "Soaking up some sun?" he said. Baker was forty-two. He had always been a few pounds overweight, and now that he wasn't working he had put on a few more. His sandy hair was sun-streaked. He wore a mustache and neatly-trimmed beard because he thought it gave his ordinary features a certain rakish flair. We had never been close. To be honest, he grated on my nerves. Now that time lay heavy on his hands, he stopped over frequently, and I was too polite to object.

"Have a seat," I said, trying to hide my annoyance.

He flopped on the folding lounge next to me. "How's work going?"

I grimaced. "Don't ask."

"I wouldn't mind going back to work. It was my whole life, and now all I get is a nightly rerun through Ned. This system sure wasn't designed for people who like to work."

"Unfortunately, you were out-voted by the middle class. Cheer up. If you want to work, you can take over for me any time

you like."

He laughed. "No thanks. Factory work doesn't agree with me." Baker gave me a faintly superior look and settled back on the lounge. "My Double's still researching resistance-free superconductors. We're close to a breakthrough on a new coaxial cable."

I tried to look interested. "Really?"

"I'll get the credit, of course, but there's no feeling of accomplishment. It's not the same as doing the work myself."

"You've got the money; set up a small research lab at home."

He shrugged. "Gretta won't leave me alone long enough to get anything done. She's planned another weekend trip to the Catskills. The kids are anxious to go. Me, I'd rather stay home."

"I'd like to get away for a couple days, but until Rey gets out, I can't go anywhere."

He nodded and gave me a sympathetic look. "You have to Link at Retention."

"I wish I could skip a few sessions. But that's out of the question unless I suddenly develop a masochistic streak. I was late one night, and I started to go into withdrawal."

"Getting charged with education fraud was a bad break. They're running cross-scans on all the public records nets these days. It's too easy to find hackers who will crack the security codes and enter phony records. No doubt the Feds'll start demanding hard-copy proof of ed credits before long."

"Those could be falsified, too," I pointed out.

"Not as easily. Universities keep ident-coded records. Everything has to match up."

Lucinda appeared at the back door. "Al? Could you start lunch?"

Any other time, I would have balked at the idea of being called from the pool. I had so little time to relax. But I felt uneasy around Baker. I knew I must be the talk of the neighborhood. "Be there in a minute."

Baker pushed himself up from his chair. "Guess I'd better get home." He hesitated as if debating whether or not he should say what he was thinking, then said in a low tone, "Better keep an eye on

that wife of yours. Now that you're back to work, she doesn't stay home much. I don't mean to stir up trouble, but I thought you might like to know."

I managed to mumble, "Thanks." Lucinda had never shown an interest in other men, but she wasn't happy, and I knew it. Still, the fact that she was spending more time from home didn't mean she was seeing someone else. But it did seem odd. Until now, she rarely went anywhere without me. My conversation with Rey earlier that week came back to haunt me. He, too, was worried about my relationship with Lucinda. It was one more problem, and I had enough already. I pushed the matter from my mind and went inside to start lunch.

By the end of the month, Todd and Lucinda were as crabby as I was, but for a different reason. Lucinda was furious because I was still sulking over Rey's absence. If I visited with Rey after Data-Link, I had little time left for her and Todd. But if I went to Retention just long enough to Link, I was so miserable no one could stand me. My close relationship with Rey had been brought into sharper focus by our separation. I realized now how psychologically attached to him I was. While I loved Lucinda, she couldn't understand me. Not like Rey could. Rey didn't judge me or find fault. How could he? He was me; he was simply me in a different form.

As for Todd, he noticed how distant I had become, and I was afraid he thought I didn't love him anymore. I was too preoccupied with work and with my need to be with Rey to give the boy the attention he deserved.

So it was with mixed emotions that we packed the car and went on a day trip one Sunday. Lucinda and Todd both felt it was merely a concession on my part, that my heart wasn't in it, and they were right.

I took them to a place near our home in upstate New York I had always loved as a boy. Letchworth Park boasted a magnificent gorge, three waterfalls, and miles of wooded trails. We parked near the upper falls and started hiking along the edge of the gorge.

"It's easy to imagine Indians walking

these trails," I said. Lucinda and Todd walked beside me in sullen silence.

Todd wore a backpack over his thin shoulders and a light jacket knotted around his waist. Lucinda had on her blue, insect-resistant, one-piece hiker's suit. It was a pity no one but me was enjoying this trip. It was a perfect summer day. The sky was a rich blue with few clouds. The air smelled like damp leaves.

"See that trestle up there?" Their eyes dutifully followed my gaze. "Steam engines used to come through here." No comment. I might as well have come alone.

We walked for miles. Lucinda and Todd walked ahead of me. Their voices and occasional laughter drifted back on the wind. Lucinda veered off, Todd with her. They started down stairs made of slabs of stone. At the bottom, the shallow river spread over a rocky shale bed. Brightly dressed hikers came down the bank and approached the river from the opposite side. Some had already gathered for picnics on the expanses of flat, dry stone that ran alongside the river. Children, pant legs rolled to their knees, waded into the shallow water and walked across the stones. The serenity of the scene filled me with new despair. Despair and longing. It seemed like centuries ago, in another world, that I had come here before.

"Let's eat, Dad. I'm starved," Todd called.

It was the first he'd spoken to me since we'd arrived, and I hurried down the steps to join them.

"Need a hand?" I helped him take off the backpack which held our lunch.

We sat down on the stone and Todd smiled. "Mom made chicken and salad," he told me as he lifted plastic cartons from the pack.

Lucinda looked at me. There was no warmth in her expression.

"I'll bet it's delicious. She's gotten to be a good cook again." It was the wrong thing to say, and I realized it immediately. We'd had more than one fight about the fact that Rey had progressed beyond my own limited skill as a cook, and beyond hers, as well.

"No doubt Rey could make better,"

Lucinda said.

"Don't start," I warned her. "This is supposed to be a happy outing."

She jerked silverware and napkins from the pack, refusing to look at me. "It might have been if you hadn't started talking about Rey before we were even out of the driveway."

"All I said was that it was too bad Rey couldn't come along."

Her hands were trembling as she opened the carton of chicken. "Can't we ever have a day together without Rey?"

I looked at her helplessly. "We are. We're here, just the three of us."

She looked up and skewered me with her gaze. "Are we really? Why do I get the feeling Rey is here with us? That we can never quite leave him behind?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I only mentioned him once."

Todd piled salad on his plate. He studiously ignored us.

"References to Rey come out whenever you open your mouth. Like that comment about my cooking." She shook her head. "You really don't see it, do you? You really don't see how sick you are."

My appetite vanished. I looked at her coldly. "I don't think this is the right place for this conversation, do you?"

She cast a sidelong glance at Todd, apparently getting my point. "No. I don't suppose so."

"All I have to say is, it's a matter of opinion who spoiled this trip. You or me. Now pass the salad."

That did it. She passed the salad, all right. Dumped it in my lap. Todd started to cry.

"That was just brilliant, Lucinda." I stood and swept salad greens from my pants. "Now you've got Todd crying. Are you proud of yourself?"

"Don't give me that," she spat. "It's your fault. You ruin everything. Todd cries himself to sleep at night thanks to you."

"If he does, it's only because you've turned him against me. He and I got along perfectly well when Rey first came. Now I'm starting to feel like a stranger in my own house."

"Stop it!" Todd wailed. "Why can't it be like before? Why can't we be happy?"

While I had been unwilling to involve

him in a family argument before, the damage had already been done, and I said, "The reason is that your mother is too insecure to have your Uncle Rey around. She feels threatened."

"Let's go," she said through her teeth. "I've had enough of this. Maybe I'll drop you off early at Retention. You can get a train home."

"That sounds like an excellent idea."

Lucinda stuffed our uneaten lunch into the backpack and we started back to the car. My mind churned with angry thoughts. We'd fight worse than we did now when Rey got home. I had that to look forward to. Did I want to listen to her jealous tirades for the rest of my life?

But what choice did I have? I could move out, take Rey with me, file for divorce; but what would become of Todd? The courts would probably award Lucinda custody. I wasn't sure I could live with that. And yet, if I were granted visitation rights, if I remained in the city so I'd be only a short drive away, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Divorce was better than a miserable existence with Lucinda. I didn't need her. The only thing I would be sacrificing was sex, and at the moment, that seemed a fair trade for a quiet life with Rey.

Is this what you really want? Better make sure, because if it is, now is the time to make the break. I rubbed my forehead, confused. I wasn't sure I felt anything for Lucinda, and I suspected she didn't love me. It was doubtful anything would change that.

We had another few blow-ups, but after a couple months Lucinda's attitude improved enough that we managed to live in the same house without shouting all the time. It was a temporary lull. Once Rey came home the hostility would probably start all over again. During the last month of Rey's sentence, I made up my mind to leave Lucinda.

Work had remained as irritating as my first day back on the job. My foreman, the android duplicate of Jack Gringer, was as anxious as I was for Rey to return.

"Nothing personal," he told me, "but we can run the line faster with Rey." I was more than happy to relinquish all my re-

sponsibilities. Rey would take over the banking, manage our few investments, pay bills, take the car in for service—in short, do all the tedious jobs I didn't care to do. That was the blessing of Data-Link: people could deal Double to Double with the assurance that it was the same as dealing with the Double's owner. In any way that mattered, Rey was me.

I counted the hours until I could pick Rey up at Retention. When Sunday night arrived and I brought him home, Todd greeted him enthusiastically.

"I missed you Uncle Rey. We all did."

Rey tousled the boy's brown hair and said in my own affectionate tone, "It's good to be back, Todd. I missed you, too."

Of course that wasn't true. Rey knew all the right things to say, and he could be deceptively human, but he hadn't missed them. He hadn't even missed me. That painful truth was one I didn't care to dwell on. It was like being hopelessly infatuated with a woman who could never feel the same in return. I let Rey's comment drop. People lived with false illusions all their lives; this was more harmless than most.

"Where's your mother?" I asked Todd.

Todd shrugged. "Probably out in the agri-dome. He gave me a wise smile and said, 'That's where she usually goes when she's in one of her moods.'"

Lucinda appeared in the doorway across the room. "Could you make dinner, Rey?" Not as much as a "Hello. Welcome home." Sure, Rey wouldn't feel slighted, but it seemed so callous. If only to set a good example for Todd, she should acquiesce. The boy might think it was acceptable to be rude and insensitive and treat his human acquaintances the same way.

As expected, Rey showed no sign of offense. "Certainly, Lucinda. What would you like?"

She studied him with an unreadable expression before answering. "Whatever. Call me when it's ready. I'll be in the dome. I'm reporting oegonias." Without as much as a glance at me, she left the room.

Lucinda ate hastily, as if she couldn't wait to get back to her begonias. Throughout the meal, Rey was silent. He wasn't designed to eat,

but he usually joined us for dinner because I insisted on treating him like part of the family. The tension was palpable. Once, Todd tried to start a conversation by asking Rey questions about Retention, but Lucinda cut him off with a stern glare and said, "I don't think that's anything a little boy needs to know."

I noticed Lucinda watching Rey throughout the meal. She didn't seem bitter, just sad. "I'll need a hand in the dome, later," she told Rey when he brought us coffee.

He set her cup in front of her. "I'll be happy to help you."

We finished our coffee, then she excused herself and went back to her begonias. Rey didn't say anything although he must have noticed her cold attitude. He bustled about, gathering dishes and loading the purifier. In a couple days, we'd move out. Rey might question the wisdom of that decision, but he would follow orders. I planned to leave Lucinda a note on the table, explaining why we had left. She wouldn't understand at first. She'd be angry. But after a while, she would see it was for the best. Anyway, I told myself defensively, a man has a right to be happy.

"Finished," Rey said. He closed the purifier and set the timer.

"Let's get the Link out of the way. I have some reading I'd like to catch up on."

Rey nodded. "I'm sure Lucinda will keep me busy for the rest of the evening."

"Like usual," I said.

We went to the Link Cubicle which had once been a spare bedroom. Two cots rested against the far wall by the window. A small table stood between which held the Data-Link console. I sat on one of the cots while Rey set up for the Link. A moment later, Rey handed me fiber-cable A, and I hooked up, then settled back on the cot.

"Ready?"

"Ready. And Rey? Welcome home." "Thanks." I smiled faintly to myself, anticipating Rey's next words. I was not disappointed. "Good night, Al."

I closed my eyes, infinitely content. Rey was home. Lucinda couldn't spoil my relationship with Rey unless I let her, and I wasn't about to give her the chance.

Lucinda was propped up in bed, reading, when I came into the bedroom. She didn't look up. I sat on the edge of the bed, feeling a twinge of regret at the thought of leaving her, and touched her arm. "Lucinda?"

She set the library screen down on the bedside table and slid under the covers. "Come to bed," she said, still without looking at me.

I caressed her shoulder gently. She was wearing a mint green nightgown. I had surprised her with it during our last vacation when we went to San Francisco. Had she worn it tonight to make me think how much our lives had changed since then? I felt guilty, but my guilt wasn't so much from thinking about the unwanted turn our relationship had taken, as it was from the fact that I found myself wanting to make love to her one last time. It seemed like a cold-blooded, heartless desire, and I wasn't proud of it.

I slipped into bed and experimentally ran a hand over the smooth fabric of her nightgown. I half expected her to push me away as she usually did, but to my surprise, she rolled over and put her arms around me. I was afraid to meet her eyes. She might see something in my own that would give away my thoughts. But her eyes were closed. I bent and touched my lips to hers. She kissed me in return with an intensity I hadn't seen in her since Rey had come into our lives. This one time, I wished she wasn't so eager for lovemaking. Why couldn't she simply accept my passion with her usual bored indifference? I would forever remember our final union as an act tainted by the selfish betrayal that followed. And yet I couldn't deny myself this last moment of pleasure with her. As much as I despised myself, I allowed myself the loveless melding of flesh, and afterward, when she sighed and laid back, I tried to console myself with the thought that at least she had enjoyed it.

Todd had already left for school when I woke. It was nine o'clock. The sheets beside me were cold. I dimly remembered Lucinda getting out of bed a couple hours ago, but I had fallen back to sleep immediately. I sat up and

rubbed my face. Rey would have made breakfast before going to work. I smiled at the thought that my own days of slaving at the plant were over.

After breakfast, I'd tell Lucinda I was going to the city. I'd had so little free time in the last six months, she shouldn't find that unusual. Once I got to the city, I'd rent an apartment, spend a leisurely few hours at a park, then go home and covertly gather up whatever belongings I couldn't live without, and intercept Rey at work before he got on the train. I'd explain that we weren't going home.

Suddenly I wasn't so sure that was what I really wanted to do. Something about the finality of leaving behind a marriage of twelve years and turning my back on a boy whom I loved dearly, made me question my commitment to this plan. Rey was my best friend, but he was, after all, an android. Maybe Lucinda was right. I was in love with Rey, which was the same as being in love with myself. Put in those words, it sounded distasteful. I went to the bathroom to wash up, then padded out to the kitchen.

My breakfast sat on the table. And something else. A note from Lucinda:

Al:

Rey didn't go to work today. He and Todd are with me. We won't be coming home. Don't bother looking for us. I've taken money out of your account, and I have the money my parents left me. I bought a little place out of state. In the country. It won't be much of a life, I suppose. We'll have to live off the land and make do the best we can. The money won't last forever.

This isn't a hasty decision. I thought it over carefully while Rey was gone. At first, I had planned to leave and find someone else, but I realized what that would do to Todd. This way is better. Todd will soon accept Rey as his father. You're so much alike that it shouldn't be difficult for him to adjust. Rey is everything you used to be. Sweet, unselfish, good-natured. I can learn to love him the way I used to love you. Todd and I have a right to be happy. Al, I'm sorry if our lovemaking last night seems like a betrayal in the light of this note, but I wanted to savor the feeling one

last time. That sounds awful, I know. Try to forgive me.

Lucinda

I was shocked, hurt. How could she do this to me? I might be able to find her, but it would take months, maybe years. It was easy to forget in my bitterness that I had been ready to do the same to her. She had taken my son and run off with an android. It was a painful thought, even more painful than the torment I would endure tonight when my implant insisted on Data-Linking with Rey, which would no longer be possible. I crumpled the letter. Suddenly, Rey seemed like a cold, inhuman monster. He had mimicked my best traits and stolen my family's hearts. It wasn't fair. He was a machine... a machine that happened to look like me. A machine that was incapable of love. Why would Todd and Lucinda want to live with a man who didn't love them? Those sobering words made me stare at the crumpled letter in my hand.

I had been a fool, but even so, how could Rey have betrayed me? How could Rey be me and still do something like this? Lucinda had ordered him to go, I told myself reasonably, but that didn't make me feel much better. I swept an angry hand across the table, scattering food, dishes, and silverware. Glass shattered. Milk dribbled off the table.

Where my plate had sat was another note. In a familiar scrawl:

It's not too late. Not if you really want them back, Al. I found a map marked with red ink inside Lucinda's purse. The red line must show where she's taking us. I drew a copy and stuffed it inside your shoes as we went out the door.

Rey

I snatched up the note and ran for my shoes. ■



PLAY WITH UNCLE FREDDIE

Dean Wesley Smith



Good afternoon, children. Everyone make it through the tunnels without spider bites?

"Yes, Uncle Freddie."

Good. Now gather around Uncle Freddie's chair. I have a new story for you today. And it's a good one. Better than any I've told before. Stephanie, would you close the door, please? We wouldn't want any of the Banker spiders to drop off the wall and crawl in here, now would we?

"No, Uncle Freddie."

Everyone ready? Good. Today's story is going to be what is called an interactive story. That means that you all get to decide what happens. Bobby?

"Does that mean we get to help tell

the story?"

Yes and no. Uncle Freddie will tell the story up to a point where the character in the story has to make a decision. You kids will make the decision and Uncle Freddie will tell the story from there. Does everyone understand? Carlie?

"What happens if it's the wrong decision?"

Why don't we wait and find out. Okay? Any more questions?

Good. Our story starts with you, that's all fourteen of you, as the main character. Yes, Carlie.

"You said if you told a story about someone, it always came true. Will this story come true for us?"

Uncle Freddie's stories always come true. But this one will be somewhat different. Why don't we get on with the story and find out just how? Okay? Good.

You are crawling down into the grate to come to Uncle Freddie's story hour. But even though you are real careful as Uncle Freddie taught you to be, your mom sees you. What do you do then?

Do you climb back out and go home, telling her that you were just trying to reach some quarters you thought were down there? Or do you go down through the grate and worry about it later? What do you do?

Anyone? Jimmy?

"I'd climb out and go home."

Everyone agree with Jimmy? Good choice. Why'd you pick that, Jimmy?

"Because that's what you taught us to do if someone saw us."

Good. Let's go on with the story as if you went home, since no one chose the other way.

You go home and your mom is mad because she doesn't want you fooling around in the drains. She thinks they are dangerous. Since you've been warned before, she sends you to your room and is going to talk to your dad when he comes home.

You go to your room, but it's boring there and you know you're going to miss a good Uncle Freddie story. Do you sneak out your window and climb over the fence into the neighbor's yard or do you stay in your room like your mom told you to do?

Benny?

"I'd climb out the window."

Everyone agree with that choice?

"Yes, Uncle Freddie."

Okay, so we have a bunch of brave kids here today.

You know that you can't go back out to the normal drain entrance because your mom might see you. You remember there is another drain entrance over near the supermarket. You run there, pry off the lid, and climb down inside, even though Uncle Freddie said never to go into the tunnels any way but the main grate.

It's dark in there, but you figure it is only half a block until the tunnel meets the regular lighted passageway to Uncle Freddie's story room. You think you might

be able to make it. Do you decide to go ahead? Or do you climb back out and go back to your room?

"We go ahead."

You are all real daredevils today. Okay, so you start into the tunnel. But after a few hundred steps, the tunnel turns and then turns again. You start feeling lost. You can feel all the spider webs brushing against your face and arms.

You start remembering all the stories Uncle Freddie told you about how the Bankers are huge spiders that spring off the wall and attach themselves right to your face and then suck all your blood out through your eyes. And you remember how Uncle Freddie told you that the Bankers' poison mummifies your body and you start getting really scared. Should you turn back? Or should you go ahead and try to find the regular lighted passageway where Uncle Freddie protects you from the huge spiders?

I see this choice isn't so easy. Stephanie? What do you want to do?

"I'd turn back."

Suzy?

"I'd keep going if it wasn't too much further."

How many of you would turn back? Three. That means the rest of you would go on. Right? For the moment, I'm going to tell the story of what happened when you turned back.

You remember the pipe, but you don't know which way the turns went. You think the drain opening was only a little ways away, but it's now there. You're lost. You panic and run when little things start crawling all over you. But you run into the wall and there are lots of little bugs and spiders that feel soft and moist. It seems as if the entire wall is moving.

You scream out into the pitch blackness of the tunnel and suddenly there are bugs on your arms, in your hair, crawling on your face. You try spitting them out, but they keep crawling in so fast you end up throwing up.

The spiders are biting you all over and it hurts as if a thousand people are pinching you all at once. You're slapping at everything that moves, but soon you are too weak and the pain is too much from all the bites and you fall down and let

them cover you.

In a few minutes there is nothing left of your body but a pile of bones that no one will ever find. The end.

So that was the wrong choice and you are dead. Now you three lie down. That's right. On the floor. You can still listen to the story, but since you're dead, you can't answer any of the questions. That leaves eleven of you. Debbie?

"Does this mean we're going to die when your story comes true?"

Why don't we just wait until the end of the story and find out what really happens. Okay? Now, is everyone ready to go on?

"Yes, Uncle Freddie."

Good. So instead of turning back, you think that the safe passageway is ahead just a little farther. You take a deep breath, so as not to panic, then slowly move forward. The tunnel turns a few more times and then you see some light ahead. You think it might be the passageway, so you start to run. But as you move closer, you realize it isn't the passageway at all, but the main cavern of the Witch's Well. The light comes from the glow rock and there is a bright blue light coming out of the Well. You know the Bankers won't dare go in the cavern. But you also remember that Uncle Freddie has told you never go there without him.

You also remember that you are not supposed to step up on any of the rocks around the Witch's Well because your insides will get sucked out and splattered all over the ceiling and then will drip down the red stalactites.

You carefully go just a few steps into the big cavern and look around. Over on the other side there is a tunnel that looks familiar. You think it's the tunnel that Uncle Freddie took you through when he brought you to show you the Witch's Well. But to get to the tunnel you will have to go out into the cavern and climb over some piles of rocks. Do you cross the cavern? Or do you turn back and try to find the tunnel?

Carlie?

"I'd go across the cavern."

Everyone agree? All right.

Being very careful not to get near the stones around the Witch's well, you move toward the tunnel that looks familiar. But

you have to climb over a large pile of rocks. On top of the pile you find a long white bone that looks like it would make a good club to fight off the bankers. Do you pick it up and take it with you? Or do you leave it?

Ginger?

"No way I'd pick up a bone. I'd leave it."

Frankie? What would you do?

"I think I'd pick it up. I've touched bones before and they're nothing but big sticks."

Okay, so how many of you take the bone as a weapon against the bankers? Raise your hands. Five.

And the rest of you would leave the bone and go on over the rocks? Right?

Okay, so first I'll tell the side of the story for those that picked up the bone. You see, the bones on top of all the piles of rocks scattered around the Witch's Well are graves of beings from a race called the Contractors. Or as least that's what I call them. Throughout the world they are known by much worse names.

The contractors were the race that built the subdivision and the tunnels and caverns. They are an ancient race and the Witches allowed them to be buried in their cavern. They leave one bone on top of their burial mound and when the bone is touched, the Contractor comes back to life.

When you picked up the bone, you felt the ground start shaking, as if there were an earthquake. You hold on to a big rock as from below your feet this ugly body with bulging muscles and hair all over its face comes up through the rocks. It has only one leg and as it reaches the surface, it takes the bone away from you and sticks it against the bloody stump of its missing leg. You watch as the skin and gristle start growing around the bone and after only a moment, the Contractor has both legs and is completely alive.

The Contractor looks at you and laughs. Then before you have time to move, he grabs you and starts taking huge bites out of your arms and legs and stomach, ripping the flesh free and chewing as you scream and kick and try to get away.

But it does no good. The Contractor is a massive creature with unusual

or is a massive creature with unusual strength. He continues to take bite after bite out of your skin, smearing your blood all over his hairy face. After a very short time, you pass out and the Contractor finishes his meal, tossing your bones and what's left of your body, including your head, into the Witch's Well. The end.

So you five are dead, too. You made the wrong choice. Lie down there and listen as the rest of us continue on.

You six ready?

"Yes, Uncle Freddie."

So you don't touch the bone, but instead go carefully over the pile and to the tunnel that looks familiar. The tunnel is lighted with glow rock like the tunnel that you remember, so you start down it. The tunnel has all kinds of turns and every time it splits, you stop and try to guess which would be the right way. You're really afraid and you're trying not to cry. On some of the walls are spider webs, but you don't see any Bankers.

After a short time you're afraid you've gone into what Uncle Freddie calls the Closet Tunnels. They are a maze of huge tunnels right under the center of the subdivision. You remember that Uncle Freddie told you that another of those tunnels are formed every time a new house was built in the subdivision to hold all the things that people don't want to be seen in the real world.

The tunnel splits again and you stop and look back. You think you might be able to get back to the Witch's Well cavern. What do you do? Turn back to the cavern or go on into the tunnels some more?

Craig?

"I'd turn back if I didn't think it was the right tunnel."

Barbara? What would you do?

"I'd keep on going. There's nothing back at the Witch's Well that would help."

How many would keep on going?

Two. That means four would turn back. Isn't this fun? First I'll tell the story of what happens for you who went forward.

"Can I change my mind?"

I'm afraid it's too late, Barbara. You go forward and keep making turns and going deeper and deeper into the Closet Tunnels. Suddenly, up ahead, you see an

adult man and an adult woman coming toward you. They are both naked and they look like ghosts because you can see right through them. They see you and motion for you to come forward.

You realize now that you are where Uncle Freddie told you no children ever survive, where the things people keep hidden are stored. You turn to run from the ghosts, but another ghost woman stops you and slaps your face real hard. It hurts and your ears ring from the blow, even though you can see through her hand.

The naked man and woman catch up and start taking your clothes off while the one woman keeps hitting you and kicking you. It hurts all over and you're crying out for them to stop, but they don't. She just keeps hitting and the others keep ripping your clothes off and touching themselves all over while they touch you in places your parents told you never to touch.

In a short time the woman kicks you in the head and you black out. Eventually you die and are left to rot and be ignored. The worms and maggots will finally eat your body. The end.

The two of you lie down with the other dead children. So now only the four of you who turned back get to answer questions in the story. Okay?

You turned around and quickly found your way to the Witch's Well cavern. You decide that you are going to ask the Witch's Well how to get back to Uncle Freddie's story room. Being very careful not to step on any stones around the well, you move as close as possible and then shout at it, "Which tunnel takes me to Uncle Freddie's story room?"

The well remains quiet for a moment, then starts to bubble blue water like it's going to explode. You wait because you remember that's what happened the time Uncle Freddie brought you there to ask for clues as to who ate Carla's baby sister.

Finally, you notice that words are starting to form on the top of the water. Your are excited because you think it is going to give you the answer. You lean as far forward as you can so you can read the words:

Thirty tunnels.

Two are right.

One is lighted.
One is night.

You are disappointed because it doesn't tell you anything. But then the well starts to bubble again.

Thirty tunnels.
Two are right.
One is left.
One is right.

Again you are disappointed. The message might mean that the lighted tunnel is on the left, but there were four lighted tunnels to the left of the Witch's Well. Again the well starts to bubble.

You don't stand a chance.
Give up now.
Third from the left.
Try it somehow.

The surface of the Witch's Well becomes smooth and stays that way. You figure out that the Well might mean the third lighted tunnel from the left side of the cavern. But was that really the right one? It looks right, but what did the Well mean by "Give up now?"

Do you try the tunnel or do you stay in the cavern and hope someone comes to rescue you?

Billy? What would you do?

"I'd go down the tunnel."

Tammy?

"I'd go into the tunnel, too."

Ben?

"I'd go to the tunnel."

Sandy?

"I'd stay near the well and hope to get rescued. No way I'd go back into those tunnels."

Okay, Sandy. I'll tell what happens to you first.

"That means I die, right?"

That's right. You sit near the well and after a while you get sleepy and fall asleep. When you do, the water of the Well starts to bubble. Slowly, a blue hand that has been cut off at the wrist climbs over the side. It crawls over to you, grabs you by the foot, and starts dragging you toward the water. You wake up and start fighting, but it is incredibly strong and it pulls you on top of one of the rocks around the well. You don't even feel pain as your insides are sucked out and spread all over the ceiling. Your blood drips down the stalactites onto the floor while the hand fin-

ishes pulling what is left of your body into the Well. The end.

Sandy, lie down and we'll find out what happens in the tunnel.

You go into the mouth of the tunnel real slow, looking for traps in the weak light from the glow rocks. You don't see any, so you keep moving, trying to follow what you think may be footprints on the floor of the tunnel.

After a short time, the tunnel gets darker because the Bankers have spun so many webs that the glow rocks are covered up. You remember this area from going to the Well with Uncle Freddie, so you keep going. Pretty soon you find the two bodies of the kids who got caught by the Bankers in an earlier Uncle Freddie story. Their bodies are mummified and wrapped in a spider web. You can see their hollow eyes staring at you as you pass.

You reach a branch in the tunnel. One tunnel goes to the right and the other goes to the left. Which one to take?

Billy?

"I'd go to the right."

Tammy?

"I'd go to the left because Billy went to the right."

Ben?

"I'd go back to the Witch's Well. I don't like the tunnels."

But that wasn't a choice.

"I don't care. I want to go back."

All right, I'll tell your story first. You turn around and start back to the main cavern. Inside the cavern, you go around a pile of stones and step on a hidden trap door put there by a race I call Lawyers that live in the deepest, foulest places of the Earth. You fall into the hole and keep falling and falling.

Okay, Billy. I'll tell you what happens next.

"What happened to me?"

You're still falling. Ben. Just sit there and be quiet. Billy?

"I don't want to know what happens to me."

I'm afraid you have to. You turned to the right and followed the tunnel. After a few corners, it got really dark. You started to get scared. Then you saw a spider web strung all the way across the tunnel and

there was a huge spider in the center of it. You turn around to run but you slip and fall in the slime that covers your feet, you see these dark figures coming down the tunnel toward you. At first you think you are saved, but then you see they are ugly, puss-covered creatures. I call them the Collectors. They are the mindless slaves of the huge Banker spiders.

You scream as four Collectors grab hold of you and start pulling and twisting, trying to take parts of you back to their hungry masters. First your right hand rips off, then one of your legs. You pass out from pain as a dozen collectors take parts of you off down the tunnels so the Bankers can feed. The end.

Join the others on the floor, Billy. Now I'm only finishing the story for Tammy. You ready?

"But what about me?"

I told you, Ben. You are still falling down the deep hole to where the Lawyers live. I'll tell you when you hit bottom.

Tammy, you chose to go to the left. That choice leads you back to the door of Uncle Freddie's story room. You can hear Uncle Freddie finishing a good story and you start to run and shout to be let in. Listen now, does everyone hear the shouting from outside the back door?"

"Yes, Uncle Freddie."

Good. You run up to the back door and start banging on it to be let in. Does everyone hear the banging?

"We sure do."

But after a moment you remember that Uncle Freddie told you that you can never be late for a story. And if you try to come late, he won't let you in. You remember that he told you he can't, because it takes all of his power to protect the children in the room. He can't open the door, so you stand there and listen to him finish his story.

Behind you there is a noise, but you don't turn around. You don't want to know what is there. You just stand and listen to the end of an Uncle Freddie story that always comes true. And then you realize that the story is about you.

You listen as Uncle Freddie tells how the worst monster of all in the tunnels under the subdivision comes up behind you. It's the dreaded IRS. Its eyes have been

gouged out, it's ears cut off. It has no hair and its slimy head almost touches the roof of the tunnel. It eats Bankers for lunch and thinks children are a great snack. It is surrounded by six Collectors and they are all smiling and licking their lips.

I have to stop for a moment now because Ben, you just hit bottom and smashed all over the ground of the Lawyer's world. Six Lawyers instantly jump out from behind rocks and start licking your blood out of the dirt. Then another six join them. And then another six. Soon they start fighting over your remains, tearing each other apart. Ben, now you can lie down there with the rest and let me finish the story. Yes, Tammy?

"I didn't get another chance to make a decision."

I know, Tammy. There was no decision to be made. The IRS grabs you from behind. Hear the screams, children?

"Yes, Uncle Freddie."

The IRS takes you and in one bite, cuts off your head. Then it tosses the Collectors around it a few of your fingers and then eats the rest of you. The end of the story.

Billy?

"Who was that really outside?"

That was Jeff. I'm afraid he won't be joining us for any more story hours. He didn't remember Uncle Freddie's rules. Remember, those rules protect you from the outside world.

Yes, Tammy?

"Is it true we might someday be bankers and contactors, and end up eating people and everything? My mom said I might and I yelled at her."

Good for you, but I'm afraid you might. Kind of scary, isn't it?

"Yes, Uncle Freddie."

But if you keep coming back for more of Uncle Freddie's stories until you're too big to crawl down into the tunnel, then maybe you'll grow up to be something you'll like.

Billy?

"What's that, Uncle Freddie?"

That will be tomorrow's story. Everyone be careful going back out the tunnels. We don't want any bankers to bite, now do we?

"No, Uncle Freddie." ■

EULOGY FOR A CREW MEMBER OF THE HEAVEN'S GATE
(Hull rupture off Ceres, 7/13/2043. All hands lost.)

We used to spend our nights outside,
she and I.
Summer nights
we'd lie on our sleeping bags
and slap at mosquitoes.
The air was as warm as our blood.
I, on my stomach,
would tie the grass in knots.
She, on her back,
would watch for satellites
and tell me how far she would travel in her life.
Millions—no—billions of miles.

She'd never seen the ocean, as I had.
I told her it was cold and windy,
and really not much fun.
Then her finger would shoot up and make contact with a passing
star.
"Look quick," she'd say. "A meteor."
But I always missed them.
I would turn once more to the earth,
for comfort.
She would look at the shy,
for comfort,

and say she'd never seen the ocean.

—Lori Ann White

A LITTLE MATTER
M. R. Soderstrom

The trio's labcoats billowed out behind them as they rushed down the cold, white university corridor, the two men arguing with each other over top of their younger female colleague. It was an old argument, but Jenkins, the taller of the two men, felt renewed anxiety in his soul as he once again tried to drive his point into his male colleague's balding head. They turned a corner and continued their brisk pace, the young girl, Stacy Polo, a student at the university, trying to keep up with their larger strides.

"Just shut-up for two god-damn seconds! Can you do that, Collins?" Jenkins raged, spittle catching in his brown and gray beard. "Whether I'm right or wrong isn't the point..."

"Then what is the point, Jenkins?" Collins sarcastically asked, shaking his pink head. Jenkins' eyes widened for a moment or two. Catching hold of himself on the border of anger and physical violence, he avoided the welcoming chasm and retorted as sanely as he could.

"For the fifteenth time, Collins, we're talking about *matter* transference. *Matter!*" He waited a few seconds, then realized that his inferences were not making even a minor dent on his co-worker's psyche. "What's the use," he finally said. "Your mind's about as open to this as Boudreau's."

Dr. Alanna Boudreau was the project head who had taken one of Jenkins' notebooks on worm holes and the frothy fabric of space a year ago, turning it into an active project with full government funding for the next five years. For some unknown reason, Jenkins had never mentioned the thievery to anyone besides Boudreau. He supposed it was partly because she had managed to accomplish in a two hour meeting what he had been unable to do in ten years. When she threatened him with expulsion from his own theories, he quickly allowed her the leadership mantle. But the notebook had been only part of Jenkins' theories.

As the trio whisked around yet another corner, a faint hum began to permeate the air. They didn't hear it so much as

feel it resonating through their lungs and bones. Jenkins could feel his heart start to slap his labcoat lapels to and fro.

"If you were more in sync with Dr. Boudreau's thinking we wouldn't have had to find out about the experiment second-hand. We would have been there," Collins finally spouted.

Jenkins let it hit his back and roll off, ignoring the twinge he still felt when his theories were referred to as *her's*. He knew that in a warped way Collins was right. If Jenkins had been able to ignore his doubts about the matter transference project they would have been right there when Boudreau threw the switch. As it was, they were still several corridors away from the security lock, which wouldn't let them in once the transference began.

Jenkins felt something electric fringe his panic. The idea that something he'd created in his mind was about to become real had an odd excitement about it. But the other notebook—the one Boudreau didn't get, the one he constantly carried in his pocket—could never be completely erased from his mind's eye. He jammed a finger in his ear and rubbed as the hum's growing intensity began to tickle his sinuses.

Stacy shivered from the effect of the sound. She looked at Jenkins for a moment. He met her gaze and quickly turned his attention to the shortening hallway before him. She looked down for a moment, then up at Dr. Collins. Through thick intimidation she spoke.

"What if he's right?" she asked innocently.

Collins' head snapped around when he heard this. He glowered at her, sending her gaze down to watch the floor as it slid away beneath them. He then looked at Jenkins. Jenkins was still looking down the hall, but now he had an unmistakable smile on his face. Collins popped a Ro-laid into his rictus-frozen mouth to cool the burning in his chest as they turned the final corner.

Their eyes were involuntarily squinting from the volume of the magnetic hum

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that now thickly filled the air. At the end of this hallway was a huge metallic door the height and width of the entire hall. To its left was a small control panel—the security lock. There were two lights on its top and a protruding groove for passcards to be run through below them.

At the moment the light was green, meaning entrance was allowed. Collins pulled his passcard from his breast pocket as the trio picked up their pace. Jenkins' fear seemed to suddenly take a back seat. Boudreau was wrong—wrong to be taking credit for the project, and wrong for moving to experimentation before she had all the facts. But wrong or not, she was making history beyond that door.

Just as Collins had completely pulled the card from his pocket, the red light popped on. The trio slowed and came to a depressed stop less than six feet from the huge door.

"Dammit!" Collins spat out as he repeatedly ran his passcard through the red illuminated slot. The computer continually chimed its taunt in rhythm with the deafening hum from beyond the massive door.

...access denied... access denied... access denied...

Collins finally gave up and spun on Jenkins, once again catching Stacy between them. "This is your fault!"

"Listen," Jenkins said, ignoring Collins' childish remark. "You've got to listen to me. We may be too late, but... well, just do me—us—a favor and listen. Okay... Paul?" Jenkins pulled the notebook out of his labcoat pocket. Collins rolled his eyes and futilely tried his passcard again.

"Christ, you're not singing that 'other notebook' song again, are you?" Collins said without looking at Jenkins.

Jenkins froze and looked up at Collins. "How... Boudreau is the only one I told about this. How did you..." It suddenly made sense. All of it. Even the way Boudreau had managed to get his notebook out of its quarters—the quarters he shared with Collins. "You bastard. It was you."

Jenkins lashed out over Stacy's head and caught Collins just above the eye with a glancing blow.

Stunned more than hurt, Collins

threw himself back against the wall, the control panel digging into his spine.

"Doctor Jenkins, stop it!" Stacy yelled as she grabbed him in an attempt to stop his attack.

He could have easily tossed her aside, but his rage was sapped by depression. The revelation that everyone had been against him, had made a fool of him, was almost too much to stand.

"You don't even know what you're doing!" Jenkins yelled, allowing himself to be restrained. "The two of you have followed my notes like they're some kind of instruction manual. But you've only considered the action. What about the reaction? What about the unknown?"

Before Collins could reply, the two scientists and the scientist-to-be froze. The hum had stopped.

They all wondered the same thing: had Boudreau done it?

A second later the light on the control panel flashed over to green. Collins stared at the light for a moment, mesmerized. Finally, he lifted a shaking hand and slowly slid his passcard through the slot. Massive tumblers spun, deafening in the sudden silence, and the wall-of-door began to open.

After what seemed like hours, the lab came into view. Hesitantly, they entered. Jenkins immediately noticed the odor of brimstone in the air; a side effect that wasn't projected. To the left they felt the heat that had been generated for the transference by the huge transformers. In front of them, beyond the computer banks, monitors and gauges, stood two square four by four foot platforms.

On what they knew to be the "receiving" platform were strange burn marks and gouges in the platform's floor. They reached the control panel and stopped. On the "sending" platform shimmered a strange, whitish ooze. Jenkins was sure he knew what this was as he began to shake all over and fight for his voice. As he was about to speak, the insane Boudreau leapt up from behind the control panel, where she had been feeding on her assistant, and took off the top of Collins' head with a crescent wrench.

Collins didn't even scream. He just flopped over onto the floor like a rag doll,

moist cheese beginning to ooze from his new convertible.

Stacy screamed. She screamed for two as she ran to Jenkins' side. The Boudreau-thing ignored her and leapt onto its new morsel.

"W-what's going on? What's happened to Doctor Boudreau?" She begged of Jenkins, yanking at his labcoat. Jenkins fought for his rationale.

"It's... it's just as I feared," he answered, swallowing loudly as he watched Boudreau scoop up a handful of what had moments ago been Collins' mind. "I kept telling them, *matter transference, matter transference...* But they wouldn't listen." He was having trouble keeping his voice from cracking. Stacy stared at him, dumbfounded. He caught her gaze out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't you see?" He begged of her, pointing to the goop on the sending platform.

Before he could explain further, the Boudreau-thing stood from its carnal plea-

tures and wickedly smiled at the only other living things in the room. It took a step towards them.

Jenkins threw the notebook he still had in his hand at the inhumanity, then leapt with all his strength onto the monster that he, for all intents and purposes, had created.

"Get out! Run!"

But Stacy was fear-frozen to the floor.

The Boudreau-thing ignored the added weight of its former colleague and slammed its hand down on the control panel. The massive door began to close. The mechanism was slow, but Stacy knew she would never make it.

As Jenkins' spine was twisted like the colors on a barber's pole, the girl looked down at the notebook that had skidded to her feet. She read the scribbled title as she incoherently heard the sound of approaching footsteps:

The Incongruity Of The Human Soul And Matter Transference. ■

ADVICE FROM AN OLD HAND, TO A YOUNG MAN SHIPPING OUT

Poor boy. I hear you weep for Mother Earth.
Tell me, does your mother love you well?
Does she cradle you on acid clouds? Swaddle you in muck?
You should mourn a woman, not a heartless shell.
Why praise a hunk of rock for giving birth?

Billions of earths where you're bound, my lad—not one
but many mothers, dandling babes upon their dream-bright seas.
Living worlds with granite teats to give their children suck.
Yet babes mouth stone-cold nipples, clutch an errant breeze.
Each world blind to grieving daughters, weeping sons.

The husband I have chosen does not plant his seed in flesh,
and his full-spectrum caresses have left me without child.
Still, I am more your mother than that ball of mud below.
I, not some other life you find when some other earth beguiles.
Your thoughts and mine are human, our blood is red, our hearts can mesh.

Mother Earth can never nurse you. Of her soul she's been bereft.
Other-worldly children are kin to ice and visions,
not to you. The answer to your despair only liars claim to know.
You want my advice? Humanity is no prison.
Look around you, boy. It's all that we have left.

—Lori Ann White

LASERS, TURRETS, & CLAWS

Book Reviews

WRITERS OF THE FUTURE, Vol. VI

Algia Budrya, ed.
Bridge Publications, 1990
\$4.95, 408 pgs.

A Committee often means a compromise leading to mediocrity, but *The Writers of the Future* anthologies have proven that that need not always be the case. This year's fiction was judged by thirteen household names of Science Fiction and ranges from merely good to just plain outstanding. Also, the addition of the *Illustrators of the Future* contest has resulted in all the stories having original art to accompany them. Here the work is not as consistent as the fiction, but the artist's contest is only now getting off the ground. The volume in general benefits from the illustrations, and it offers aspiring illustrators a professional outlet. The lead story in the anthology is Michael Scanlon's "Kansas City Kitty," an alternate universe tale of a bomber crew that finds, to their amazement, that we really aren't at war with the Russians. Scanlon displays a mastery of action and suspense, for the pace never loses a beat from beginning to end. John W. Randal's "Water" is another sterling tale, this one a haunting vignette that blurs the line between reality and fantasy. The illustrator of this story, Beryl Bush, has provided a nice surreal piece reminiscent of Blake. "Under Glass" by David Carr is certainly the most off-beat story of the bunch. It's a tale for aviation buffs with a twist; it all takes place in a low-gravity environment. The best story in the collection might just be David Ira Cleary's "The Bookman," a charming fantasy about the power of literature extended into the physical realm. Cleary poignantly comments on the influence that words can have upon the world and, ultimately, the universe. Ironically, the least interesting stuff in the anthology comes not from the contestants but from professional writers. There's the requisite bit from the late L. Ron Hubbard, an essay written in the thirties on the use of suspense in fiction. It's interesting in its own right, but seems orphaned and out-of-place in the middle of the anthology. There's a short essay by Alex Schomburg

on what it takes to be an illustrator, and a discourse from Ben Bova on science in Science Fiction. These bits of non-fiction are set apart and highlighted in the table of contents, but should actually be relegated to the rear someplace. It's the contestants and their fiction that make this anthology shine, and they deserve all the attention.

—J.P. McLaughlin

BLACK SNOW DAYS

Claudia O'Keefe
Ace, 1990, \$3.95, 344 pgs.

Nuclear winter has left the Earth adrift in "black snow" in this bold post-apocalyptic first novel. War has left the Earth uninhabitable. The only survivors are in protective "Tanks." O'Keefe displays the mastery of a veteran in this tale of Eric Pope, a surgically altered human designed for survival on what is left of a ravaged Earth. He's now the only one who can survive outside of the Tanks. His uniqueness makes him an outcast, and his distance from the rest of surviving humanity makes him appear to be a savior of sorts. All through this, Eric comes to terms with the side effects of his alterations including a splitting of his psyche into male and female polarities. His female half, Vivian, is constantly illuminating the shortcomings of his personality, and this is very much a story of his learning to get along with his other self. The backdrop for this, a world awash in radiation, makes the premise much more believable with all the old rules of humanity thrown out. O'Keefe's novel is powerful, moving, very disturbing, bitter... and yet hopeful. A remarkable debut from a writer sure to attract notice in the future.

—J.P. McLaughlin

WARSPRITE

Jefferson P. Swycuffer
TSR Inc., 1990, \$3.95, 313 pgs.

Two robots have been unleashed upon the earth... from somewhere, by someone, for some reason. As to these last three areas of information, they are only dealt with in brief, and the answers to questions are left mostly to the imagination. This is not as bad as it sounds, for the story is not one of massive conflict—it is one of individual

conflict and human... excuse me, *human-like* venture. Delta, a chromium-plated robot of feminine physical detail and superior intellect, is after Omicron, a male gender android armed for war and of lesser intellect than his pursuer. They enter the world as "babes," with little previous memory. Each, in their own fashion, are endowed with emotions of sorts, and sensory awareness of themselves and their surroundings. Altogether, an interesting premise for some simple and straightforward personal and cultural exploration into conscience, conflict, and the nature of humanity.

Unfortunately, the text fails. It does address these issues in a fashion, while striving to maintain the spirit of adventure, but the text consistently strangles itself in technical and mechanical difficulties.

I hate to rate about science—such reviewers bore me—but writers should try to be consistent when using basic principles and common sense. One example: Delta's ability to alter the friction coefficient of her skin, allowing better traction with her fee. This requires a rough consideration of the force causing contact and pressure between two masses—in this case, gravity. Yet, upon first encounter with a cliff, Delta steps off without a thought, not reasoning that if the force is constant enough for walking, it will remain constant when she steps off the cliff, and bring her into contact with a new surface... with alarming effect. There are other such places in the text where care was not taken with basic science, character logic, and common sense.

As to mechanical difficulty, one detail is the unnerving switches in various third person P.O.V.s. The story is in the third person omniscient, and switches on occasion to omniscient-filtered—i.e., omniscient narrative rendered through a particular character viewpoint. Nothing wrong with that, but in several passages where the reader is taken inside a single character's viewpoint at a critical moment in the characters' interaction with a change in the environment, the narration suddenly pulls back at the oddest times to the third person limited, losing the reader's intimate connection with the character's experience of the moment and destroying the reader's comprehension of the character's immediate perspective and reaction.

LASERS, TURRETS, & CLAWS

In some cases, too many textual problems make a reviewer toss a book aside without a thought. With *Warsprite*, I find myself feeling sad, because I had hopes for it: a basic premise alluding to a little social SF swirled with some fantasy and basic escapism—a mix that I enjoy. But as if on a walk through a new country-side, I suddenly found myself paying so much attention to overcoming obstacles along the path that I had little time left over to enjoy the view.

—J.C. Hendee

NIGHTALES

John Tiggles, Kevin Browne, & Stephen Blue
Upper West Side Publishing, 1990
\$14.95 + \$1.75 S&H (U.S.), 297 pgs.

There has always been a division in the market between comics and what some know-it-all critics like to refer to as "real art." Thank god that old lie is dying—at least I think it is. And with the publication of *Nightales*, we see a further joining of fields of artistic expression: sequential art (comics) and prose.

The base format of the novel is a "rametale," an old convention that dates back to, and beyond, such classics as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in the late fourteenth century. This form usually involves a group of travelers, and their personal interaction as they move towards their destination, as the "frame" of the work. Within this structure are related, usually by the characters, interior tales that reveal the characters, their situation, and the world in which they live. The new twist introduced in *Nightales* is the medium of the frame; it is told in comics format.

The book centers around a company picnic for a small electronics firm whose founder and president, Clarence Reddick, is less than happy with his employees over the companies falling profits. And having been coerced by his wife into "having a good time," Mr. Reddick steps onto a bus with his employees for the ride of his life.

I have at times preferred Black & white art to color, simply because it shows more of what an artist is capable of. Stephen Blue is the comicist for this project, and the pure B&W seems to be home territory for him. The illustrations are crisp and clean in detail and aptly textured. Shade and

shadow are used as an enhancement to image and not, as some artists use them, as a secondary method of building point-less complexity. I would be hard pressed to find a single stroke of Mr. Blue's pen that wasn't necessary to the image. There is also good staging of tone, mood and atmosphere: brooding, slightly foreboding, and with a light undercurrent of dark humor.

As Mr. Blue's images unfold the tale, stories begin to be told by passengers on this less than, more than, usual bus ride. And each tale, in its own right, takes a small piece of our ordinary world and lifts away the mundane reality to expose the bizarre that's right in front of us.

Not wishing to give away too much of the interior tales, I will list my favorites:

"Tycoons" Is a new, real twist on the old real estate game.

"All Bets are Down" in a casino where losing your most valued possession is the best thing that can happen to you!

"Greatest Gift Of All"—Jimmy Mallard, thug and hitman, doesn't deserve it, and in the end he won't want it, but he's got just the same. Who really wants to live forever?

Eleven other tales of Twilight Zone-ish, Night Gallery-esque horror and weirdness round out this collection. The concepts, taken from screenplays by Kevin Browne,

are rendered by John Tigges into colloquial prose that are generally smooth and easy to read.

My only major criticism of the text is that the framing fails. Although entertaining, none of the tales specifically relate to the central frame character, Clarence Reddick, nor do they illuminate other characters or their relation to Mr. Reddick. It becomes easy to see that the plots, the tales themselves, and the "frame" were all individually conceptualized and not developed as integrated parts of the greater whole. Sad but true; the potential in interconnecting the elements more profoundly was not applied. But still...

My associates know my hatred of contemporary horror and dark-fiction—it bores me. I find most such material worthy of nothing more than a yawn, a sigh, and a strike-anywhere match! The fact that I enjoyed this book, that it sits upon my shelf as a permanent addition to my library, is the highest praise I can give.

To Kevin, for the concepts and ideas—to John for the prose—to Stephen for images... kudos to you all, and may the royalties flow!

Upper West Side Publishing
P.O. Box 1512
New York, NY 10023-1512

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SOUND SPECULATIONS

Science Fiction & Fantasy in Music

Science Fiction and Fantasy themes have risen, over the decades, to a prominent position in our culture. We can now find such themes in all of our arts. We've seen films, television shows, art, some theater, and even an opera, if memory serves correctly. But aren't we missing something, one of the more popular art forms, per se?

We're talking about music. Okay, opera is a type of music, but I'm talking about mainstream music—rock, folk, pop, country, etc. There have been and are, many tunes out there strongly or specifically based on Science Fiction and Fantasy themes. Some of them are old, some are "ancient," and some are new. And if you look hard enough, you'll begin to see more and more popping up every day.

Rather than bore you to tears with an analytical dissertation, let's just stick to the reality of music—listening to it! And that is the aim of this new section to our magazine: to compile and share a list of SF/F music that everyone can use to hunt down material for personal enjoyment, or inspirational and creative needs.

Now, we're not after soundtracks to SF/F movies (like *Star Wars*), or theme music (like the one for *Star Trek*, film or TV)—anyone can find that stuff. We're interested in material constructed on true Science Fiction and Fantasy themes (such as "Thriller," by Michael Jackson), or songs inspired by SF/F material in another media (such as "Moon Over Bourbon Street," by Sting, inspired by Anne Rice's character Lestat).

We'd also be interested in any material that is good for general inspirational background music to listen to while creating your latest speculative masterpieces.

So, see what kind of list you can come up with, then drop a postcard to:

Figment Press
Sound Speculations
POB 3566
Moscow, Idaho 83843-0477.

And now, here's a beginning list of material for you to search out, and good

luck finding some of them. All listings in quotes are song titles; all listings in italics are the titles of albums.

[This first list was put together with the aid of Barb & J.C. Hennes, Barbara & J.P. McLaughlin, Jon Gustafson, and Helen Hill.]

SF/F Themes

Styx	"Castle Walls" "Pieces of Eight" <i>Mr. Roboto</i>
Mike & The Mechanics	"Can You Hear Me?"
Gordon Lightfoot	"Wreck of the Edmond Fitzgerald"
Heart	"These Dreams"
Black Sabbath	"Heaven 'n' Hell"
B. O. C.	"Veteran of the Psychic Wars"
Rush	2112
Warren Zevon	"Werewolves of London"
	<i>Transverse City</i>
Jefferson Airplane	"I want to be a Test Pilot"
David Bowie	"Ziggy Stardust & the Spiders from Mars"
Germaine Jackson	"Escape from the Planet of the Antmen"
Queen	"Who wants to Live Forever"
	"Gimme the Prize"
	"One Vision"
Zager & Evans	"In the Year 2525"
Meatloaf	<i>Bat out of Hell</i>

Inspirational/Creative

Isao Tomita	[Any album, except the Greatest Hits.]
Tangerine Dream	[Any album.]
Axel F	(?)



That's all for now. We'll have even more titles for the next issue. And in the meantime, we'll be expecting to hear from the rest of you!



APRIL 1980